





Becoming the Forest

Treading the arboreal pathway
through the backwoods of black metal

A project by Una Hamilton Helle,
co-edited with Lotte Brown

Issue 2

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INN I DE DYR

Epigenetic Memory in the Spruce Tree

Una Hamilton Helle in conversation with Carl Gunnar Fossdal



Forest covers 37% of Norway's combined area, almost half of which is made up by the tree species called Norway spruce. The rest consists of mostly pine and birch. It is therefore only natural that the spruce forest should feature so heavily in black metal album covers and songs. Photographs of ominous black tree lines and lyrics about disappearing into the depths of the forest abound - it is almost as if the spruce tree

has become its own character in the mythology that black metal has become.

Carl Gunnar Fossdal is a Research Professor in Molecular Biology at the Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research (NIBIO), whose research looks at epigenetic memory in Norway spruce. I spoke to him about his findings in the seeds and growths of Norway's most common tree species, and wondered whether these findings could be read as scientific allegories of age-old ideas about trees as holders of wisdom, permanence and memory, or vice versa.

Una: I became interested in your work as a molecular biologist when I read an article where you spoke about spruce tree seeds as having 'memory'. It was explained that the seeds, although moved to a different climate than where they originated, would 'remember' the climate from which they came. Could you expand a bit more upon this project and what your research in the area is? And for somebody unfamiliar with the study of epigenetics and molecular biology, could you give an overview of what these sciences are in layman's terms?

The seeds, although moved to a different climate than where they originated, would 'remember' the climate from which they came.

Carl Gunnar: Epigenetics represent aspects of an organism's behavior (phenotype) that can't be explained by genes alone (genotype) - the classical basis of evolution.

PE SKOGERS FAVN

Flexibility in the genes is caused by epigenetic mechanisms. Epigenetics is the reason why having a gene for a certain disease doesn't necessarily mean you'll get the disease, as how that gene is actually being expressed and its impact on health is dependent on small reversible chemical or structural modifications to the chromosomes. DNA can be methylated, and the histones proteins that scaffold the DNA into chromosomes slightly modified. These modifications impact on whether a gene *is* expressed, or how strongly it is expressed, thus changing the phenotype (i.e. the behavior of the organism). Such epigenetic modifications give the organism greater flexibility to respond to (and sense) changes in the environment and is a type of (molecular) memory. The way you describe epigenetic memory is almost right, Una. Spruce trees do not remember the place they originated from, but rather the environmental conditions under which they were formed. The conditions in a given place change from year to year and so does the (epigenetic) impact on the developing embryo.

Epigenetic memory in Norway spruce is caused by the surrounding environment when the embryo in the seed develops. For instance, temperature increase may cause permanent change to the tree's growth cycle and this change will be remembered as long as the tree lives. Epigenetic memory in Norway spruce affects its bud phenology, which is how fast it breaks bud in the spring and forms new buds in the autumn. Spruce trees do not tolerate frost during new growth periods, so the correct timing of bud burst can be a question of life or death if there are late spring frost incidents. We don't yet know if some of this epigenetic memory is passed on to subsequent generations of trees. I also study another phenomenon coined 'acquired resistance' in spruce. When a tree survives a pathogen infection, or severe stress, a defense memory called 'acquired resistance' can be induced. Acquired resistance (also called priming) is the ability to react more strongly and effectively to a challenge the second time around - weakly analogous to when a person is vaccinated (although plants do not have circulating blood with B-cells that produce antibodies like we do!). Acquired resistance also requires an epigenetic mechanism but these 'memories' are more short-lived and last only 1-3 years in trees, rather than a lifetime.

Epigenetic memory most likely makes these trees able to adapt more rapidly to changes in their environment, which can be critical for survival if there are rapid changes such as those associated with global warming and ice ages.

Whereas many musical subcultures are about rejecting society, black metal became very much about rediscovering elements of a culture that one could feel a sense of belonging to



Una Hamilton Hollo, *Becoming the Forest: Tree*, collage, 2015

Una: On a slight side note, epigenetics is also used as a term in psychology theory, of how external influences shape you in a series of predetermined stages throughout your life. Does this have any relationship to your field, i.e. is there a correlation to how the term is used in both fields? From a very crude reading, it sounds like a nature versus nurture argument - can this be translated in scientific terms?

Carl Gunnar: The nature/nurture argument holds true in both cases (but if and only if the 'theory in psychology' is true) and there may well be some subtle connections between these fields. For instance, epigenetic changes (in the biological sense) have recently been linked to sexual orientations in human males. Obviously epigenetic modifications in neurons have the potential to alter the behavior of people (and other animals), much like epigenetic effects alter the seasonal behavior in spruce.

Una: My work looks to Norwegian folklore for inspiration, where romantic and animistic interpretations of Nordic nature play an important part. In our folk tales, it is said that large stones may once have been trolls caught unaware by the sun, and folkloric characters such as *Nøkken* and *Fossegrimen* represent personifications of lakes and waterfalls (or perhaps the personification of the danger those places can represent). I am interested in the spruce tree because it seems to have taken on this symbolic quality within black metal. Tree lines (and they are always *spruce* tree lines) are depicted heavily on album covers, the forest is often portrayed as the main protagonist in song lyrics, and forest spirits are conjured through sounds and liner notes. I believe this came from a subculture that was trying to unearth something that was quintessentially Norwegian. Whereas many musical subcultures are about rejecting society, black metal became very much about searching out, or 'rediscovering', elements of a culture that one could feel a sense of belonging to. Naturally, as there is so much of it in Norway, and as it is so embedded in our cultural traditions already, nature became one answer. At the same time, it is almost like the landscapes depicted in black metal are visual representation of the music: jagged mountain peaks, pointed tree tops, always black and white, hostile and dark... Do you recognize this reading of the forest and the spruce tree?

Norway spruce is a tough species to work on from both a scientific and laboratory point: it has seven times more DNA than a human

Carl Gunnar: Yes! Spruce trees are very tough and resilient, particularly in the deep, cold and dark winter. The spruce forest dominates the landscape, growing dense, acidifying the soil beneath it, and it largely dictates what other plants may grow alongside it, displacing other life forms. However, in late spring and close to summer it is transiently light green, soft and welcoming in the long bright days with new growth, far from that darkness. Migrating birds find shelter, build nests and raise their young in the tree crowns. The character of Norway spruce changes dramatically with the seasons, from my perspective.

To me the tree is a reflection of how its inherited genes and its environment interact with (and impact) each other. My focus also tends to be on an individual tree, and

on how trees differ from each other, rather than on the forest as a whole or as one (connected) thing.

I also want to know how genes are regulated inside the various cell types in a tree. Reproducibility is important, so we use clones to see if the same changes happen in all members of a clone (i.e. individuals with the same genes but existing as separate individuals, like rooted cuttings or shoots originating from the same cell culture). I view members of a clone as genetically identical, but when epigenetic changes occur (as in the case of epigenetic memory) even members of the same clone show differences and emerge as something separate and unique - the obvious human analogy is when identical twins show significantly different behavior or a different fate due to epigenetic changes in their DNA.

Norway spruce is a tough species to work on from both a scientific and laboratory point of view, as it is recalcitrant to extract DNA and other molecules from. It has seven times more DNA in its chromosomes than a human, long generational times, and delayed flowering (it can start producing seeds only after fifteen years, although usually this happens much later), and it reaches massive sizes. This makes it very challenging to do genetic research on trees compared to herbs and plants smaller in size and with less time between generations.

The animistic aspects in my work are not apparent as no spirits are considered to inhabit our trees (as in folklore or folk religion). If trees or rocks have a spiritual essence, it is in the realm of art and beyond the scope of my work, and is likely defined by the 'eyes' or 'wish' of a conscious beholder. There is no separable soul/spirit that may impact the body in my view, but indeed during epigenetic memory the environment impacts on and modulates how the genes are expressed, and imprints a lasting impression, so there is a (far-fetched) analogy.

The spruce is recalcitrant: 'having an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline', this chimes well with black metal's attitude

However, as scientists we are not yet able to completely rule out that some plants may have some level of consciousness, although this is probably a consciousness very different from that in humans and other animals. People have had very different ideas about consciousness in animals through the ages. For example, some vegetarians won't eat animals because they feel pain or because they have a higher level of consciousness (like dolphins and other whales). There is no indication people will ever feel the same way about plants as about animals, even if the felling of majestic trees and clear-cuttings in forests can get people's emotions going at times.

Una: I enjoy the idea of the Norway spruce as a dominant (over-powering and acidifying) life form and a recalcitrant tree. The definition of recalcitrant is 'having an obstinately uncooperative attitude towards authority or discipline'. This chimes well with black metal's attitude, if you ask me... The spruce seems to be very much aligned with giving two fingers to authority, but then it also has this menacing and overpowering vibe, a bit like a mean older sibling.

I was also interested in the idea of priming or acquired resistance, as an extra defen-



Una Hamilton Helle, *Becoming the Forest: Cut*, collage, 2010

sive 'back-up plan'. I guess as a tree you have no choice but to stay put so you are going to fire all your defense mechanisms towards any threats. Am I right in thinking that the Norway spruce is one of the trees with the most developed form of resistance? You describe the process it uses to survive and also 'take over' the topography - is this because other trees just aren't as dominant? With its resilience in mind, what are the current thoughts on how the Norway spruce will survive in the future, with possible climate change-induced temperature rises? Are we looking at a future world filled with spruces as a dominant force?

Carl Gunnar: Norway spruce has both constitutive (continuous) and induced defenses. The constitutive defenses include the dead outer bark, specialized cells and channels of resin. The inducible defenses are turned on when these constitutive defenses are breached by a pathogen. The inducible defenses can activate genes and the production of enzymes (proteins) that can then directly attack the pathogen or defend the tree by producing protective chemicals and increased fortifications of the plant cell walls. Its defense system has been compared to a medieval castle with a watery moat and rings of solid walls, with armed sentinels on the lookout for enemies. Priming is a temporal (memory) layer that adds to this defense, as previous exposure will set the defense system at a higher state of alert and the tree will be more equipped to withhold an attack. Although we are studying priming/acquired resistance in spruce, we do not yet know enough to say if they have the best defense mechanisms in the plant world. We do know that their primed defenses are more long-lasting than in any other plant studied so far - after all, these defenses can keep a tree alive for up to and beyond 5000 year life spans - but we are also some of the few who are looking seriously into this in long-lived plants. Most scientists tend to study more short-lived and non-woody plants, as results are quicker to obtain when studying shorter life spans.

Its defenses can keep a tree alive up to and beyond 5000 year life spans

Una: Norway is full of trees and obsessed with wood. On the one hand it seems to me that the relationship to the forest is one of dark mystery, almost spiritual. Black metal relates to it this way - as a place where you can fully be yourself - both a place of subversion and one where romantic notions of what it means to be Norwegian are explored. On the other hand, there is this very pragmatic and practical relationship to trees as a resource and a tool. We use them to build with, to make paper out of, to burn... The fact that a book about how to chop and stack wood was a bestseller in Norway says it all, really. I'd be interested to hear your views about this idea of trees and nature as a symbol of 'Norwegianness'. I would assume that through your research you relate to it in a very different way?

Carl Gunnar: The fact that *Picea Abies* is synonymous to 'Norway spruce' says it all, doesn't it? My fellow scientists from other countries (Russia, Sweden, Finland etc.) are envious that the common name used is Norway spruce, named so by the British due to exports to the UK in the old days. This is for good reasons, as this tree species is in most parts of Norway quite a recent immigrant (<2000 years). So even as a

scientist I also feel connected to this tree species and its 'Norwegianness'. Having worked with Norway spruce since 1995 and seeing its inner complexity and beautiful ability to respond and adapt, I am getting pretty obsessed with it myself. It is our preferred forest species to study and our most important tree species economically and ecologically.

I have a lot of respect for this tree, as it is surprisingly well adapted and able to thrive in most parts of the country, despite being such a recent evolutionary settler. In the winter, when it is at its most resilient, it can even survive immersion in liquid nitrogen (-196°C) so it is extremely cold tolerant. In the late spring however, the new buds may not even tolerate -1°C , which can result in new growth wilting and dying. Norway spruce is both extremely tough and subtly vulnerable, depending on what part of the yearly (growth) cycle it is in. It also has both male and female characteristics. The individual tree has both male and female 'flowers' (reproductive organs), so any given tree can be both a father and a mother to a new seed, although even if it has both reproductive organs 'selfing' is not common.

Una: Many black metallers have spoken about how the surrounding landscape feels like a direct connection to, and the only stable element of, a distant past, characterized by Norse mythology and Scandinavian folkloric tradition. From a biological perspective, I am sure you would disagree with the use of 'stable' in that description! In black metal, however, it is almost as if the spruce tree has become this topographical monument; a symbol of a longed-for past that people are trying to connect to - maybe you could say it was almost functioning like a topographic totem pole. The idea, therefore, that trees and their seeds have a type of memory is therefore a very nice allegory to me. Could you outline how this 'memory' works in practical terms - how far back does it reach and what do we know about the spruce tree's resilience? I read that the spruce tree has been around for 300 million years, whereas modern man has been around for 200,000. Is there something we could 'learn' from the spruce and its adaptability?

In the winter, when it is at its most resilient, the spruce can even survive immersion in liquid nitrogen (-196°C)

Carl Gunnar: I agree with the notion that spruce and the landscape connect us to the past, but not in a romantic, uninterrupted or unaltered sense. Spruce was probably here in large numbers before the ice ages and is now reconquering the country.¹ The landscape, though altered, is probably much like it was a million years back, partly covered by the beloved snow and ice. Being this far north also allows for great day length variations, which give rise to the particular light qualities we have throughout the seasons. I view man as part of nature and believe that no forests are truly artificial - nature will find its way. The fact that man and other animals (and plants) shape the landscape and the number and types of trees in it, is only natural to me. To

¹ There is also some serious controversy regarding how long Norway spruce has been in Norway and Sweden. Some scientists claim Norway spruce survived the ice age in Norway, and one Swedish scientist even claims that some of the same trees are still alive to this day. However, this is not an established fact, even if it may seem so from reading Wikipedia.



The growth patch in Ås, Norway, where Carl Gunnar Fossdal and his colleagues study growth cycles in Norway spruce.





The trees were subjected to different temperatures during seed growth and have subsequently responded to the current climate by growing at different rates.



give an example: elephants remove trees, leaving open grassland landscapes suitable for its major feedstock, much like humans burn the forest and farm special grass varieties like wheat and other grains. Man has shaped most of the forests in Norway through massive plantings of spruce in almost ominous proportions. My predecessors approached the task of planting and spreading the forest with an almost religious zeal, and our institution's previous motto was 'to clothe the land in forest'. This came from an almost social collectivist idea that the forest would create jobs and wealth for foresters, and was a major force in how we viewed the country's relationship to productivity and natural resources. Thus Norwegian forests truly reflect the activity of man, past and present.

Epigenetic memory works as a way to adapt rapidly, without needing to select specific genes. It gives extra flexibility to cope with sudden changes in the environment. It gives the trees the time to survive to maturity and beyond, thus allowing also for natural selection to occur. We do not know how long epigenetic memory may last in spruce but it is certainly theoretically possible that it lasts many generations. In humans there are reports that it is seen in grandchildren, although in principle, all such epigenetic marks can be erased at any time.

I agree with the notion that spruce and the landscape connect us to the past but not in a romantic, uninterrupted or unaltered sense.

Una: It is interesting to hear how much spruce is formed by, and adapts to, external forces like the environment. I am interested in how much of a role landscape, surroundings and weather have in influencing the human mind, and hence the creation of artistic expressions (such as Norwegian black metal or, say, the emotionally embedded nature depictions by Romantic artists such as Theodor Kittelsen). A strictly causal relationship is easy to dismiss, as in its extreme version it is the basis for pseudosciences such as the National Socialist concept of 'blood and soil'. On the other hand, there is definitely something in the pop theory that people's moods are affected by the amount of light they are exposed to.

I view artistic expressions as ways of making sense of the world, but also embedding the world with meaning. Subcultures often attempt to rewrite existing societal rules, or replace them altogether, in order to give significance to our lives and substantiate our position in the world. Black metal was (and is) hostile towards the dogmas of religion, and espoused a decidedly individualistic attitude. As seems to be the fate of almost all subcultures, however, it eventually developed into a code of symbols and opinions that almost equal the rigid rules and measures of any religions it supposedly opposes... How does the world of science compare? In my mind, science represents the antidote to irrational behavior, but then it also has to be as open as possible in order to accept any unexpected proof that arises from experiments. True or false? How open to interpretation is your line of work?

Carl Gunnar: Science is mainly based on experimentation, and reproducibility (the ability of an entire experiment or study to be duplicated, either by the same researcher or by someone else working independently) is considered the best way to verify a

hypothesis. Science is in principle rational, but a given scientist (or group of scientists) is not necessarily always rational. Science has branched out into many disciplines and tends to become more and more specialized. The language, culture and traditions within each branch differ to smaller and greater degrees, so what you call subcultures, with very different, and even opposite perspectives, may well arise in science as well.

Established 'truths' can make it difficult to find new or alternative answers. Sometimes established paradigms are so dominant that they inhibit scientists from seeing better answers, and can even greatly delay radical new insights. Paradigm changes are sometimes needed for science to advance further and there can often be a strong reluctance to such paradigm changes by the establishment (i.e. leading scientists that hold the old view) and who, due to hard-headedness, do not allow themselves to see things in a new light.

For example, epigenetics is an emerging field in biology but its advent was delayed due to faulty interpretations by scientists like Lamarck², overstating the extent of inheritance of acquired characteristics. A much more serious setback was caused by Lysenko³, who pushed the concept of environmentally acquired inheritance to the extreme. To Lysenko, environmentally acquired inheritance was the rule rather than the exception. In his increasingly deluded mind, the principles of Marxism also held true in nature. Lysenko rejected classical genetics in favor of pseudoscientific ideas that stated that if a crop was subjected to the right environmental conditions, he could make it adapt no matter what genes it inhabited. He even believed he could turn one type of crop into another. Many scientists who opposed his ideas were killed because they did not conform to his and Stalin's ideas. With time the impact of these abysmal failures has waned and we are again able to see that there are indeed some important examples of acquired characteristics that may be inherited. We have even untangled some of the underlying molecular mechanisms that make epigenetic changes (and for these to be inherited) possible, and they are of importance in biology. Nowadays epigenetics is one of the hottest topics in biology.

2 Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (b.1744, d.1829) was a French biologist who was an early proponent of the idea that evolution occurred and proceeded in accordance with natural laws. He is widely remembered for a theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics, called soft inheritance, Lamarckism or use/disuse theory. [Wikipedia].

3 The pseudo-scientific ideas of Trofim Lysenko (b.1898, d.1976) built on Lamarckian concepts of the heritability of acquired characteristics. Lysenko's theory rejected Mendelian inheritance and the concept of the "gene"; it departed from Darwinian evolutionary theory by rejecting natural selection. Proponents falsely claimed to have discovered, among many other things, that rye could transform into wheat and wheat into barley, that weeds could spontaneously transmute into food grains, and that 'natural cooperation' was observed in nature as opposed to 'natural selection'. Lysenkoism promised extraordinary advances in breeding and in agriculture that never came about. [Wikipedia].

CONSTITUTION

WHO ARE YOU?

Hord (lyrics and vocals) of Occvltä

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

The band started in our home area in Lower Saxony, Germany. We grew up in a small village (population 400), with the Elm, the biggest beech tree forest in Northern Germany only half a mile outside of the village, and the Harz mountains, the highest mountain range of Northern Germany an hour drive to the south. The Harz is much wilder and more beautiful than the Elm, and it is famous for the historical Walpurgis Night, the witches sabbath, on the highest mountain called Brocken, or Blocksberg - which we never attended, because it turned into a bad joke. As kids we spent quite some time in the Elm, building huts, playing soldiers, and hoping to spot wild animals, there were also some old Germanic burial sites. The border to East Germany was only 2 miles away from our village, and in the Elm there was a US Army listening station with a huge tower, where they spied into the east. That made it a pretty mystical forest for us kids. I was 9 when the wall fell and the Army moved out, but the tower stayed for another few years, and once, a friend and I climbed to its top. That was pretty dangerous, in retrospect, but I guess we wanted to impress each other with our manly behaviour and climbing skills. The tower was removed a few years later.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

When we started we wanted to create an atmosphere like Darkthrone did on Panzerfaust. We discovered, that playing this gloomy, cold and primitive style of music made us feel alive the most. I played in punk bands before, and Torm had a thrash band, but Occvltä has helped us

discover that writing very reduced and minimalistic black metal challenges us in the most rewarding way. And I feel that something happens to me on stage when I perform with Occvltä, I become bold and more expressive. When we started our third brother was also part of Occvltä, and the idea was to have a family band, and we would only rehearse a few times a year to keep it special.

Occvltä is not a tool to propagate hate against religion or a certain philosophy. My lyrics are more surrealistic than satanic. Occvltä is an attempt to express the majesty of the night, the obscure, the enemy; the things that Christianity, and maybe sanity, teach us are evil. That can of course also be done with a synth, or in a painting, but we are Occvltä, and our accent is a primitive one with a certain groove, because that is where we come from.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

I've drawn various logos for the band and we've used most of them, but the last one I drew totally drunk and left-handed. It will be on the album cover. It's my favourite, because it goes beyond cool looking. It symbolises the music very well. Attentively thought of, but executed by the hands of barbarians.

On stage it is all about transformation, to become the music. There is nothing more boring to me than watching musicians who play songs or put on a show. I want to see musicians who become their song. Sometimes we paint blood on our faces, sometimes black make-up. I decide for each show what we are gonna do, but I am always wearing my leather jacket, a muslim prayer necklace that was given to me from a friend, and a necklace I made myself out of my own wisdom teeth. We

usually have no stage light, only candles, or very minimalistic stage light. No entertaining disco shit.

Our album artwork will be a black and white image of a giant bat spitting fire at an old church [ed. drawn by Sebastian Rusten, who has contributed to this zine]. It visualises our sound and live performance, and gives you an idea of what you can expect from the record.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

When we started Occvltā I already lived in Berlin, but the band was always based on the countryside. In the early days, Berlin had no direct impact on the lyrics I wrote, because I believed black metal was about snow and forests. But the city had a very strong indirect impact, because Berlin opened so many new doors. A very important duty of music or art in general to me, is to challenge your own, and the consumers expectations. And today I believe black metal should confuse you, or leave you irritated. That lead me to a point where I decided to create more personal imagery for Occvltā, and that led to the band picture on the back of our album, shot by Chris Shonting in a street around the corner from where I live, with city lights on it. No snow, no trees.

The biggest influence on our music has always been listening to different kinds of music. Certain art was always very inspiring. Also, nature, and what it means in the context of how old this planet is, what secrets it might keep, or how our ancestors explained the parts of this world they couldn't explain with logic, or maybe it's only that I can't understand its logic.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC

AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

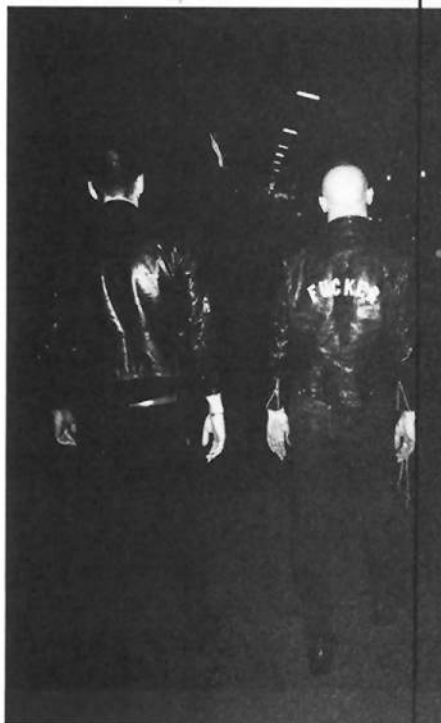
I don't know. We are from a village and used to be out in nature a lot. If we were from the city we wouldn't have that background. When I was sixteen my friends put on their black metal gear, and corpse paint make-up and we walked into the forest to shoot photos. They were not a band, they just thought it was a good idea. I was the only one not putting make up on. I thought it was silly. Twenty years later I like to use certain kinds of corpse paint, and they wouldn't. We used to hang out in the forest, drink beer and listen to Satyricon and Isengard, there were other metal heads from other small towns visiting us on weekends, not for concerts or anything, just for hanging out, drinking beer, playing football and listening to metal. That's how I spent my afternoons and weekends from fifteen to twenty basically, and playing fantasy role-playing games. Torm is almost three years younger than me, but he was part of that circle. So in a way, even though I thought it was silly when I was a teenager, black metal was already very present. For example, I was always sleeping at a friends place, and had to listen to Burzum on repeat to fall asleep. Back then I hated it.

I'd say that where we are from has no direct impact on our creative process. Neither of us went to music school nor do we come from a musical family or environment. I started making music when I moved to Berlin. If I would have stayed home, I don't think I would ever have started playing in a band.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

Yes, definitely. We don't light up candles at a rehearsal, and our bunker doesn't look spiritual at all, but we shun the light

to create a certain mood, which I need to feel right, safe or just at home. We don't want to be on stage before sunset, because black metal belongs in the darkness, and on stage, if possible, we use only candles, no stage light. That is our way to transform the space we perform at into our realm. I just read an interview with Erik Danielson from Watain, where he says a perfect show to him is when he doesn't remember anything, and I think I know what he means, because I feel the same. A few years ago when my performance became more spontaneous and confrontational, I discovered that I sometimes can't remember parts of the concert, and my explanation is that in the perfect situation my consciousness leaves the body and the music fills my soul. I can't remember because I am not in my body anymore. Hord took over my body. That is the universe or state I try to enter on stage. Maybe it's a trance.



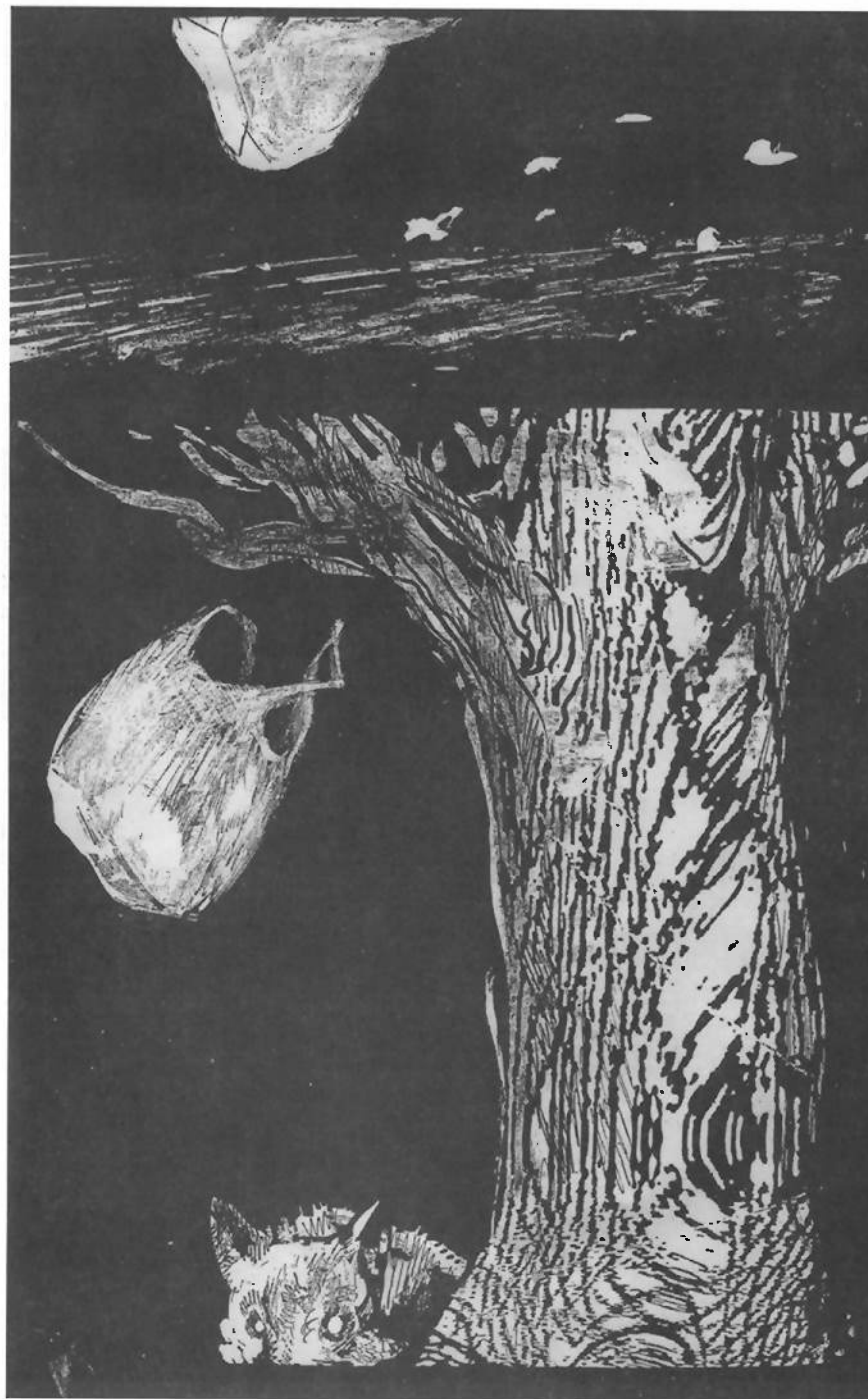
DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?

Yes, there is. I always feel fear when I am swimming in lakes; cause there could be a corpse there that I'd accidentally touch with my foot, or whatever. When I was hiking in Scotland with a friend, we were camping on the foot of a mountain over a lake. I was staring at that lake for an hour, and wrote lyrics for a song about my fear. „Between highest mountains, glacial rocks on top, I sit and I wait, I'm staring at the lake.“

Photo of Occulta by Chris Shonting

Overleaf: Ibrahim Ineke, The Night's Last Quarter

(deleted sequence), marker, ballpoint, correction fluid,
xerography on DIN A4 paper, 2012/16





Here the repellent harpies make their nests

Amelia Ishmael

For two nights there have been full moons.
Tonight the moon rose large and round into the violet air,
heaving its weight above the horizon of the wide lake.

I desire to return to the woods,
but am caught within the thick walls of this city.

I do not feel the forest anywhere.
That is not true.

There are no real walls here,
in this concrete forest,
and no body looks up anymore.

*For example, the night that the bombings happened,
I heard someone shout in front of the house (with an accent):
"Did you see what we did today!?"*

Through these holes,
the city breathes.
The sidewalks are hunting grounds, spot lit by streetlights.
We once thought that the light would make us safe...

our corruptible bodies.

This city grew out of the swamped lands.
It was promised to us to replace the toil of the fields,
but the hardness of the concrete, once set, breaks the teeth, fills the stomach with
empty weight, and dries the spirit into dust.

Above the streets, the trains still push through the stagnant air.
I can hear and feel them through the walls.
Their wheels pound and screech, spreading low rumbles through the hard ground and
high-pitched whistles through the crisp dark sky.
They move, though the city is frozen.
Outside of my window, the honey locust's thin, spindled branches sounded long
scratches and brisk raps on the glass.

I climbed out and down into it.

We have already gone down.

Throughout the night I hear the sirens,
lone men walk the streets...women, children...

*their starving ghost-like faces,
...for feeding makes her hungrier.*

More frightening than the wolves that populate the woods,
black cars, veiled by night, emit gunshots.
They pierce the air with mad violence and betrayal,
through doors and windows and flesh,
through the illusionary boundaries between home and city.

*The leaves not green, earth-hued;
The boughs not smooth, knotted and crooked-forked;
No fruit, but poisoned thorns...*

I witnessed the leaves change from a scented bright-green to golden.
I witness them scatter onto the cold sidewalks below.
I witness the neighbors sweep them with grass brooms into the street,
the city's trucks will carry them away.
No body looks up.

Plastic bags, caught by the cold wind, are blown into the honey locust,
replacing the fallen leaves.
Their thickness wearing down—they crinkle, and then flap.
Their songs soften into whispers.
I lean into the tree, chewing its bark.
Pulling at the bags, like long hairs growing out of its arms, I wrap them around me, to
conceal myself further.

This is where I am from:
Within the branches of a single tree, perched,
surrounded by the concrete forest.

*The Harpies, feeding on the foliage, create
Pain, and an outlet for the pain as well..*

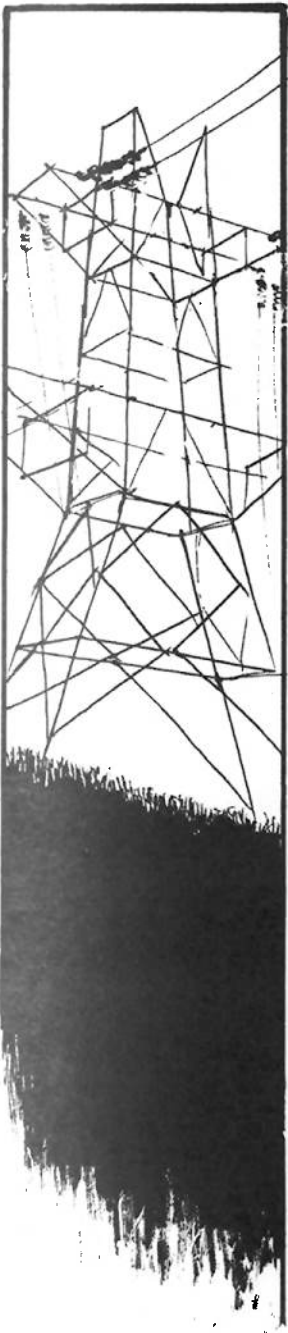
For forty days I consumed the tree's bark. I ate of its leaves. I drank the thick sweet
honey out of seedpods.

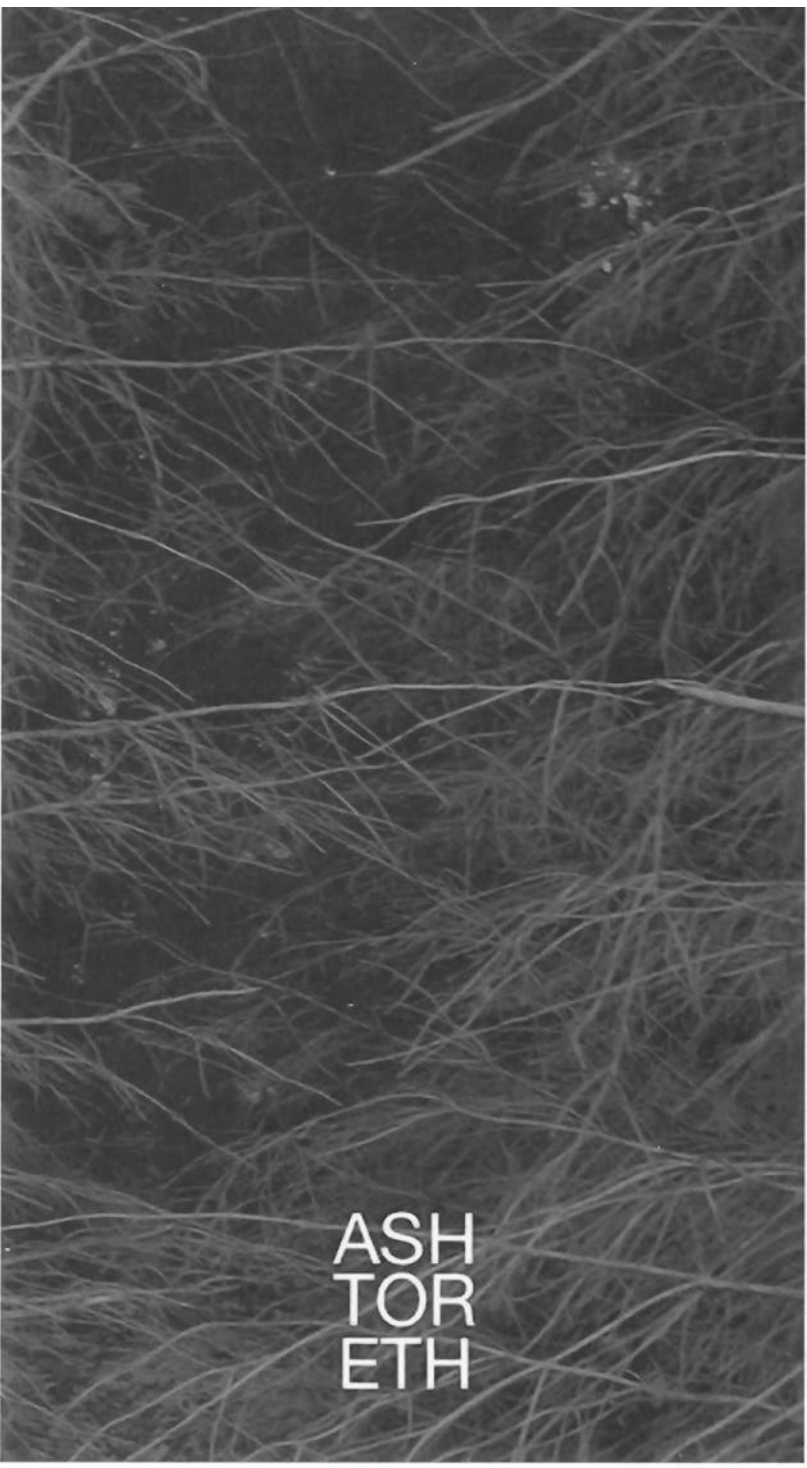
*Our pain..
will lessen if you eat us.*

Hissing and sputtering.
Weighing in an urge to live.

But, buildings begin to disintegrate as soon as they are built.
When all the boundaries are permeated, nothing is fixed.
When the swamp returns, the concrete will sink and the stones will loosen.
Then, all will become honey fluid once more.
No body looks down anymore.

Illustrations by Ibrahim Ineke





ASH
TOR
ETH

WHO ARE YOU?

Ashtoreth \ Peter Verwimp

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

I'm currently based in Antwerp, Belgium. It's a small city with a long cultural history and a rich pool of creative outings in all forms of art. On its outskirts there are quite a few beautiful parks and forests for when one feels the urge to wander.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

As a musician I play in one-man shamanic drone project Ashtoreth (guitar and vocals), as well as in Brussels Black Doom experimental outfit Emptiness (guitar) and I create remixes and sound for films and artist videos. In terms of approach, the music projects couldn't be more different. Emptiness focuses on all things urban and the alienation and decay of our (western) society; whereas for Ashtoreth everything revolves around, and is sourced from, nature and the energies that are present in it. And there is the shamanic aspect as well - it's something I study and practice and that has found its way into my music and art. I feel both extremes serve the same purpose, a possibility to reflect on ones self and the state of the world we're living in.

Apart from playing music I'm involved with art as well. I use my home in Antwerp as a platform for music performances and art exhibitions where I take on the role as curator. I've organized three editions of the Ceremony of the Ascension festival in various locations here in Antwerp, showcasing the drone/ambient underground from Belgium and around the world. My work can take on different forms and uses different media, from publications to installations, photography, sculpture, digital, analogue,...much depending on the concept and research behind the subject.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

For Ashtoreth all things visual stem from my connection to nature and the shamanic approach to it. The imagery I use always has a link to the forest, and more specifically to trees. There is an enormously powerful energy emanating from them, being firmly rooted in the soil, yet reaching for the sky. My first album 'Itobia', which was released by Antwerp fashion label Pelican Avenue, has quite colorful artwork and depicts all sorts of animal skin textures, from reptilian scales to feathers. The split album with TCH and accompanying remix album named 'Angels guide the way to our harbor' show an enlarged print of a "sea angel", a type of mollusk. For my upcoming album on RotkatRecords I'm working with artist Fia Cielen, who is creating an album cover with crystals, animal claws, flowers and other elements from the natural world.

When I'm playing live I want to create the right atmosphere for myself and those gathered to go on the journey that each performance is meant to be. I always burn white sage at the beginning of each ceremony. In shamanism sage is used to purify and to connect people. The smoke of the burned sage has a visual aspect as well as a spiritual meaning and it gives a strong smell sensation to those present. Afterwards I use Palo Santo to equal the energy again.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

I would say that the environment around me influences me greatly and it has become part of my creative process. On the one hand I live in a city where I experience an urban reality. On the other hand I'm lucky enough to have a garden with



trees where I'll spend time on a daily basis. Then there are the weekly walks in the forest that will always inspire my thoughts and creativity. In my room/studio, I surround myself with shamanic and natural objects to create an atmosphere that feels good to create in and be inspired by. I've made these altars around me since I was a kid...

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

I guess a lot less than my surroundings. I consider myself an inhabitant of Earth more than anything else. I've spent much time traveling to different parts of the world and I feel a sense of belonging in all of those places, even though the cultural, political, religious and socio-economic background might be totally different from what I'm used to. Then again, visiting those places always leaves an impression that can be inspiring to the creative process.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

The universe I enter when playing music is always one of connection. Part of that is the connection to the audience through the exchange of energy through sound, and another part is a connection to Spirit, to the other dimension, to the void...

DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?

Strangely enough, this happened in Florida during an art residency I was doing and it marked the beginning of Ashtoreth, as well as my shamanic path. I say strangely enough because I'm not at all a beach person, but having lived near the ocean for six weeks during my time there, I noticed how the rhythm of the ocean waves and the different composition of the air influenced the rhythm of my daily life. I would wake up and go to sleep much earlier, my appetite increased etc. That same rhythm found its way into the way I compose my music. Literally waves of sound washing ashore.



AGAINST THE MIGHTY, OMINOUS FORCES OF NATURE...

Nature, myth and national identity in the art of Theodor Kittelsen

Camilla Christensen

By the first half of the 19th century the nations of Europe found themselves struggling with an identity crisis. Among them was the newly minted country of Norway. The fledgling nation, having lived for centuries under Danish rule, sought its own culture, one unaffected by foreign influence. "The pursuit of the Norwegian soul" became the subject of national interest and objects, songs and stories that were considered characteristic of Norwegian history and culture were mined as source material. Brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm had recently proven in Germany that folk tales were more than "idle fantasy", and so the documentation of regional folklore in Norway would form an important foundation for a vision of national singularity. These legends, fairy tales and folk songs were heavily utilised as inspiration by then contemporary musicians, writers and visual artists, including painter and illustrator Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914).

This revival paved the way for a cultural policy initiative Norwegian folklorist Bjarne Hodne has referred to as an "ideologically shaped, heavily symbolic creator of identity." As a result of this process, the peasantry were especially celebrated and idealised, seen as they were as an almost uninterrupted link between the heyday of the High Middle Ages and the newly formed Norwegian state. Scattered far and wide across the country, the "common people", as they were referred to, had lived their lives relatively unexposed to and unaffected by Danish rule. Their narratives and belief systems represented an authenticity believed not to be found in the major cities, influenced as they were by the continent. Another "uninterrupted link" to the past attracting much attention was the country's landscape. Norway's high mountains and dense forests were portrayed as an inherently primal force, an embodiment of the "distinctive Norwegian soul". In both painting and literature these natural elements formed dramatic backdrops for the characters; people who for generations had strived to inhabit these landscapes, and whose conduct, traditions and stories seemed largely to be derived from their proximity to, and dependence on nature.

For Theodor Kittelsen this was exactly where the character of the newly formed nation of Norway was to be found – not among the financial and political urban elite, but with the ordinary folk living in the rural districts, and in their distinctive customs. Kittelsen grew to become one of the most popular and celebrated artists of the era, shaping generations of Norwegians' understanding of the characters from the country's folklore, providing an image of the Norwegian landscape as never seen before.

This slinking monster, which kills even the slightest joy such a mighty nature could provide...¹

In the traditional definition of the word, the term folklore represents a number of belief systems concerning supernatural beings, forces and relations occurring alongside human existence. Clear distinctions are usually drawn between two contrasting domains; the human sphere, and the wilderness. That which has been tamed, by agriculture and construction, represents the safe, domestic and anthropogenic domain; That which exists beyond this sphere – mountains, moorlands, forests or sea, –uncultivated land–, represents an unknown and unsafe realm, which, in folklore, is given will and intention through a variety of residents.

One such resident is the troll. Ever since the ancient Norsemen, tales and legends have placed the troll in a continual battle with humans. Hymir's poem in the Poetic Edda tells us "The mountain troll roared, thundered in the mountains. The entire ancient earth was shaking,". The trolls of the 19th Century, however, had developed into a significantly different breed than their ancestors. These creatures emerge as larger than life, and are often the key obstacle in the protagonist's journey. The troll must always be defeated. However, this is rarely accomplished through swords and sorcery; instead, the hero, often a poor and unfortunate soul, needs to outwit the troll. If successful, all the riches of the mountain will be within reach, and he will be able to relieve his family of debt and penury. The underlying allegory of these narratives was that one did not have to be rich and powerful to prosper. Anyone who was smart, worked hard, and remained humble and thoughtful to those around them, could secure a better future. For Kittelsen, the figure of the troll became the predominant allegory for everyday struggle and toil, representing the threat and uncertainty which poverty so brutally brought with it.

Kittelsen was no stranger to hardship. He had been thrown into poverty as a child when his father died abruptly, leaving a struggling single mother with little means to provide for her large family. These humble beginnings would later shape Kittelsen's worldview. He avoided Christiania, - now modern-day Oslo, where many of Norway's cultural personalities preferred to settle. Instead, Kittelsen sought the countryside, the poorest parts of Norway, where he encountered people with whom he felt an immediate kinship. Most people did not live in the city and had neither an education nor the means to put enough food on the table, a fact that resonated with Kittelsen's experience of early life. This could also explain his life-long fascination with folklore as a subject matter. When looking closely at the fairy tale tradition one finds that these stories primarily emerged as much-needed respite from a dreary and harsh reality.

¹ From a letter Kittelsen wrote to the artist Gerhard Munthe, 1905, quoted in Koefoed; Økland. *Th. Kittelsen. Fra Lauvliå til våre hjerter*, 2007, p. 108

In a letter to the artist Gerhard Munthe, Kittelsen wrote about his image 'Ha va detta for noko?' (eng. 'What on earth was that?; seen directly opposite):

This is how everyday life often appears to me; imagine the people sitting inside the small cabin: there is anxiety and crushing poverty. It would be so beautiful here, if it were not for the everlasting penury, present in every step they take. That slinking monster, which kills even the slightest joy such a mighty nature could provide.

The real and the unreal – depicting a magical world

Many people associate Kittelsen primarily with his drawings and paintings of trolls. Given their recurrence as a subject matter in Kittelsen's work it would almost appear that he felt a kinship with them. Residing deep in the forests, wanting to be left alone, it is not unthinkable that these creatures in some ways reminded Kittelsen of himself. Some of his contemporaries certainly commented on this likeness, living as he did far away from the hustle and bustle of civilisation in a secluded rural area in southern Norway. According to art historian Holger Koefoed, no artist has managed to get as close to nature and its cast of folkloric characters - some would even claim that Kittelsen was clairvoyant, and that he could observe the invisible creatures of the forest, without them being able to see him². In his memoirs he wrote:

There came a strange anxiety over me, as I sat alone, up there, amongst the dark crags. A charcoal black pool lay between the steep rock walls, from which I expected that at any moment a gloomy gigantic head should silently emerge. Then came the fog. Everything disappeared into that grey-white sea, - only the wild mountain peaks wandered along, as huge trolls in the lonely desolation. Then suddenly, these giants also sunk into eternity, - I sat alone once again, trembling with the chill of disquietude.³

In light of disciplinary perspectives, Kittelsen's viewpoint appears intelligible. Folklorist Virginie Amilien argues that the boundary between reality and fantasy is highly nebulous in old folklore, arguably because man has never been able to fantasize without referencing back to the world they come from:

² Holger Koefoed; Einar Økland. *Th. Kittelsen. Kjente og ukjente sider ved kunstneren*. J.M. Stenorsens Forlag a.s. 1999, p. 229

³ Theodor Kittelsen. *Folk og trolde: minder og drømme : med skizzer, tegninger og malerier*. Bjørn Ringstrøms antikvariat, 1997, Facsimile ed. Original ed. Kristiania; København : Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1911, p. 84.85



What ever was that?, Theodor Kittelsen, 1905. Pencil and watercolour on paper. Photo: Andreas Harvik

The Ash Lad and the Troll, Theodor Kittelsen, 1900. Oil on canvas. Photo: Jacques Lathion

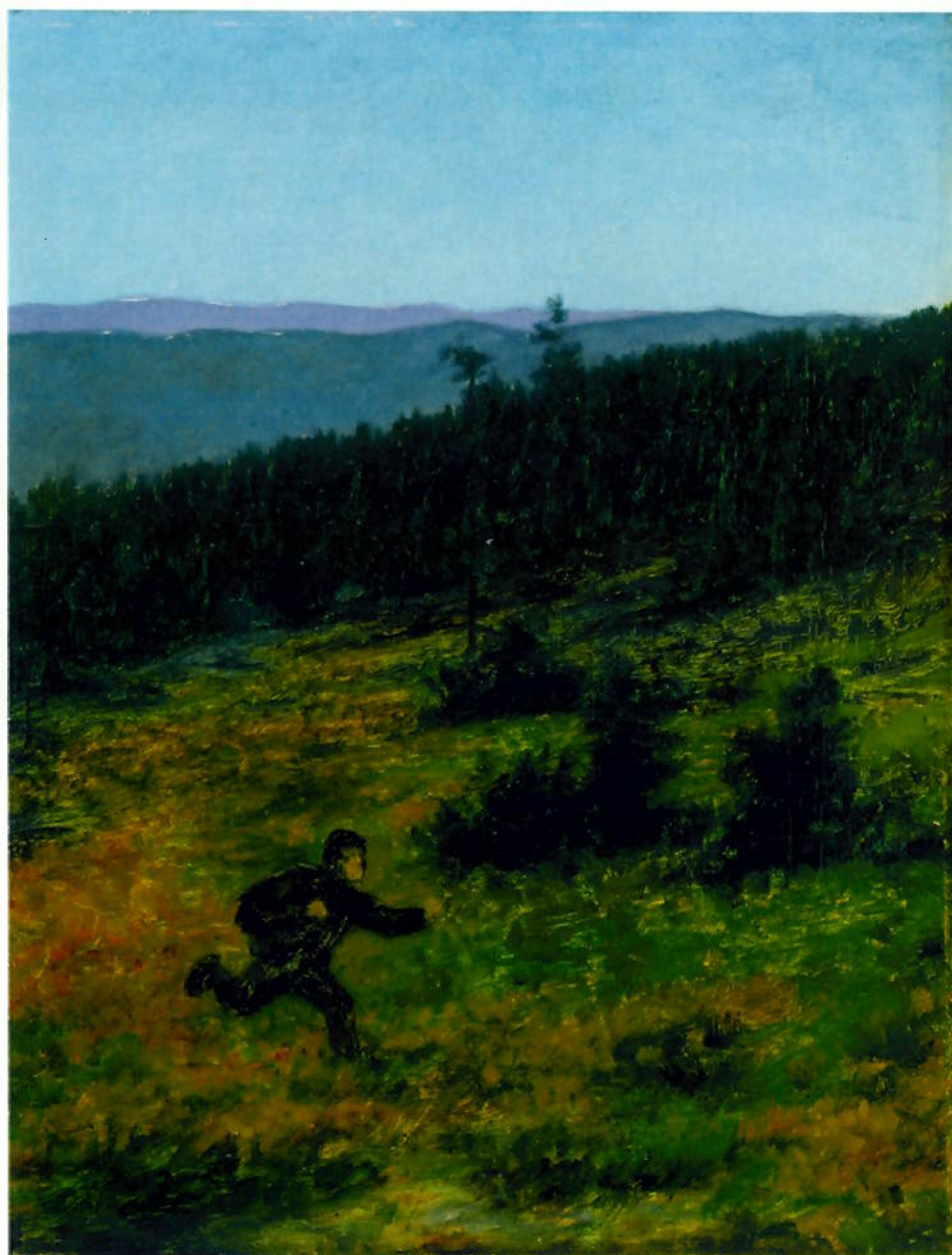


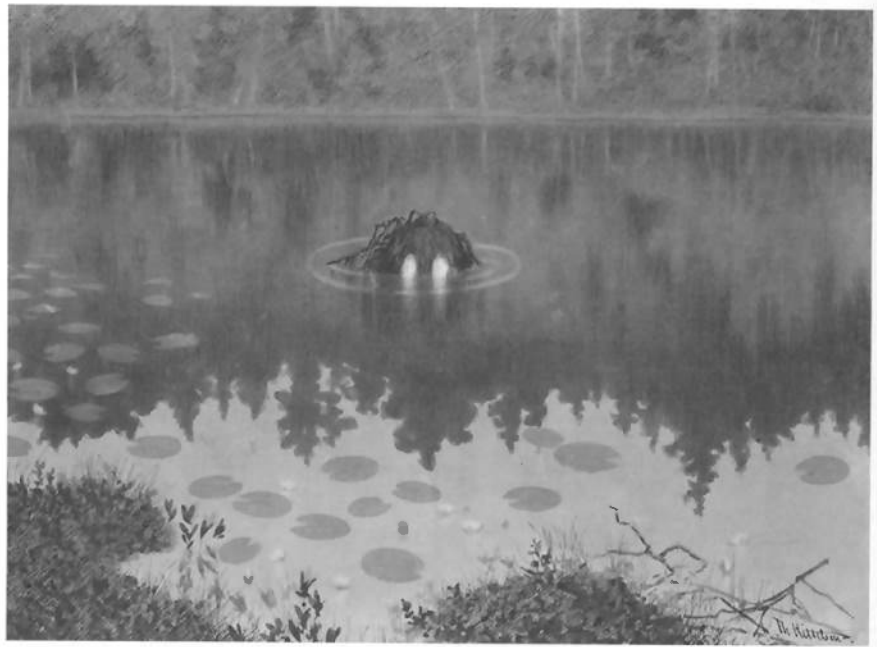


Nokken, Theodor Kittelsen, 1892. Pen, pencil and wash technique on paper. Photo: Jacques Lathion

View from Stalheim, Johan Christian Dahl, 1892. Oil on canvas. Photo: Jacques Lathion







Nøkken, Theodor Kittelsen, 1892. Pen, pencil and wash technique on paper. Photo: Jacques Lathion

View from Stalheim, Johan Christian Dahl, 1892. Oil on canvas. Photo: Jacques Lathion



*The pure imaginative world that appears in legends and fairy tales is perhaps not just imagination, but a response to a close reality (which may be an older reality, not recognisable today because culture has changed so much since the folktales were told). The symbols and meta-language must thus be seen in context of social development.*⁴

When we read fairy tales, we must therefore take into account that they depict a reality that is constantly shifting between the imagined and the real. While reflecting reality, they concurrently represent a magical world; one that is by turns wonderful and terrible. This shifting between the real and unreal is exemplified in the sinister creature called *nøkken*, a water demon who was said to live just beneath the surface of forest lakes, awaiting his next victim. Andreas Faye, a priest, historian and collector of Norwegian folklore, described *nøkken* in his writings:

*Every year, nøkken will require a man as sacrifice. When someone is about to drown, the sound of nøkken is often to be heard; it is a hollow and terrifying scream, which in many ways can resemble the voice of a man, wailing and whining, in the last seconds of his life.*⁵

Many lives were lost in accidents and suicides out in the woods – for hundreds of years it was therefore natural to interpret this creature as the personification of treacherous and dangerous waters. In the Scandinavian narrative tradition, *nøkken* was used as a figure to (quite effectively) scare children, the aim being to make sure they didn't go near water after dark. This character is also found in several of Kittelsen's works, the most famous being the 1892 illustration 'Nøkken'. (as seen opposite) The drawing depicts a peaceful pool; the night sky and a line of spruce trees reflected in its waters. Water lilies float on the surface, all is still and tranquil, but for the lethal *nøkken*. Kittelsen has transformed a tussock into a living being, and the circular ripples in the water tell us that it has just begun to stir. Kittelsen wrote:

*He can lie there - in that big, beautiful water lily that you stretch your hand out to pick. No sooner have you touched it, before the mire sinks beneath you, and he grabs you with his wet, slimy hands. Or - when you are sitting alone down by the lake one evening, day dreaming and thinking of memories past...be cautious! It is the strings he plays which bring back memories, while he lies there, just under the surface - waiting. He knows he could so easily ensnare us in that lovely, quivering reflection.*⁶

4 Virginie Amilien. *Den annen verden i norske folkeeventyr* in *Nord-Nytt-nordisk tidsskrift for folkelivs-forskning*. No. 65, 1996, p. 110

5 Faye. *Norske Folke-Sagn*. p. 49

6 Kittelsen. *Troldekab*. Unpaginated. Chapter on Nøkken (p. 4 in article, no markup)

Finding a path – Kittelsen in opposition

Many of Kittelsen's most famous works emerge as identifiable representations of personal notions, such as the fear of water and drowning. Consequently, his oeuvre had little in common with the sublime, idealising works of the preceding national romantic era of the early and mid-19th century. One of the most renowned paintings in Norwegian art history, as seen opposite, 'Fra Stalheim' (eng. 'From Stalheim') by Johan Christian Dahl puts this distinction into perspective; in Dahl's painting, the mountains appear almost like a cathedral, the rainbow emerging as an altarpiece. The painting is unbelievably grand, both in size and in subject matter, and in it nature becomes elevated and aestheticized, framed as an object of admiration and wonder.

By contrast, the natives, who had to live and subsist in this essentially violent and unforgiving land, did in all probability not view their surroundings in the same way. Nature was first and foremost perceived as dangerous, rather than an object of affection. They were by no means indifferent to it, however; the elements were brutal, and had to be both endured and subdued, a skill, which required an understanding of, as well as a respect for, nature. This was a notion the political and cultural elite did not understand.

Kittelsen took a different approach to his native Norway than his romantic counterparts, such as the aforementioned J.C. Dahl and Norwegian landscape painter Hans Gude, whose careers were primarily established in Germany. Never really succeeding as an artist in oil painting, which held the greatest prestige in the arts at the time, Kittelsen gradually found that understanding reality was one thing; but to subjugate to it, dutifully and on principle, could be repressing. Established norms and genre conventions were like a straitjacket to Kittelsen. The truthful expression that he was searching for presupposed a total conviction in the possibilities of his subject matter. He had to *believe* in his motif, deeply and completely – even if the subjects in question were trolls, water spirits or goblins, residing deep in the Norwegian forests and mountains.⁷

"In their remoteness and feeling of powerlessness against the mighty, ominous forces of nature, people became imaginative, but also introverted and melancholic,"⁸ folklore researcher Ørnulf Hodne has written. Kittelsen's art reflects this character; sometimes beautiful and wary, at other times humorous. As shown in the 'Nøkken' illustration, there is often a touch of ambiguity in his work. It often teeters between the idyllic and the serious, reminding us that in the footsteps of creativity and joy, discouragement and melancholy frequently follow.

⁷ Holger Koefoed; Einar Økland. *Th. Kittelsen. Kjente og ukjente sider ved kunstneren*. J.M. Stenersens Forlag a.s. 1999, p. 37

⁸ Ørnulf Hodne. *Det gåtefulle Norge. Mystiske steder. Sagn. Folketro*. J.W. Cappelens Forlag A.S. 2004. p. 138

When the terrible and infinite solitude prevailed...⁹

The need to understand the challenges of life by giving meaning to them is universal, although the scope of such an understanding will naturally change over time. While historical documents can shed a more factual light on the past, folklore gives us an insight into our ancestors' ways of *perceiving* and *processing* these events. The legends that arose as a result of the spread of the black plague in Norway during the mid-1300's, remain an indispensable insight into how ordinary people experienced the horror of those times.

According to medieval historian Ole Jørgen Benedictow, it was in September 1348 that the merchant ships sailing between Oslo and the seaports in Southeast England would return with something quite different than their usual cargo. Instead of wheat, glassware, beer and wine, their crew would return with stories about a horrifying pestilence unlike anything they had seen before - as well as the sources of the pestilence itself.¹⁰ Originating from parasites living on the rodents that were regular passengers on these ships, the bacterium named *Yersinia pestis* transmitted effectively to men, whom in turn passed it on to each other. Regardless of age, gender and social status, none were spared - within a period of only two years, roughly two thirds of the population of Norway would perish,¹¹ bringing the country, as Andreas Faye described it; "to a state of powerlessness which would last for centuries."¹²

Ominous blue and purple spots appearing on the skin, aching, stinging boils in the armpits, groin and neck and lung fire were some of the torments associated with the black plague. "The spots are numbered", was a saying in Norway, which meant time was running out. As soon as the spots appeared, all hope was lost. Panic grew among the population; families, sometimes whole communities, fled to the forests and mountains, away from villages overwhelmed with the dead and dying. Families left their relatives for dead, priests did not dare to hear last confessions - the sick were left alone, to draw their last breath in fear and solitude.

The Black Death generated an anguish that would dominate people's minds, and hence storytelling, in the centuries that followed. It was a disaster of such great proportions that there was no use in finding causalities through the creatures which already existed in people's imagination. Consequently, the descriptions that emerged of the sinister figure *Pesta* (eng. 'Pestilence') highlight the need to articulate a meaningless tragedy. She emerges as a mythical creature, - not of this world -, but she is not as regular a feature in the folk tales as trolls, *nøkkens* and dwarves - she is special, unique in her malice.

⁹ This quote comes from a letter Francesco Petrarca wrote to his brother around 1350: "What should I say? How do I start? Where am I to turn? Everywhere there is grief. Everywhere reigns anxiety and fear. I wish I was never born, or at least have been fortunate to die before this time. How will future generations be able to believe that once, there was a time when all people were dead, when the earth was without residents? When the terrible and infinite solitude prevailed?"

¹⁰ Ole Jørgen Benedictow. *Svartedauen og senere pestepidemier i Norge*. Unipub Forlag 2002. p. 47

¹¹ Benedictow. *Svartedauen og senere pestepidemier i Norge*. p. 89

¹² Andreas Faye. *Norske Folke-Sagn*, 3. ed., Norsk Folkeminnelags Forlag, 1948

Dark, blind and hideous, Death, as she was also known, wandered from farm to farm, carrying with her a rake and a broom. Where she used her rake some were lucky enough to live, slipping as they did through the rakes gaps. Where she used her broom all perished.

Kittelsen and the Black Death

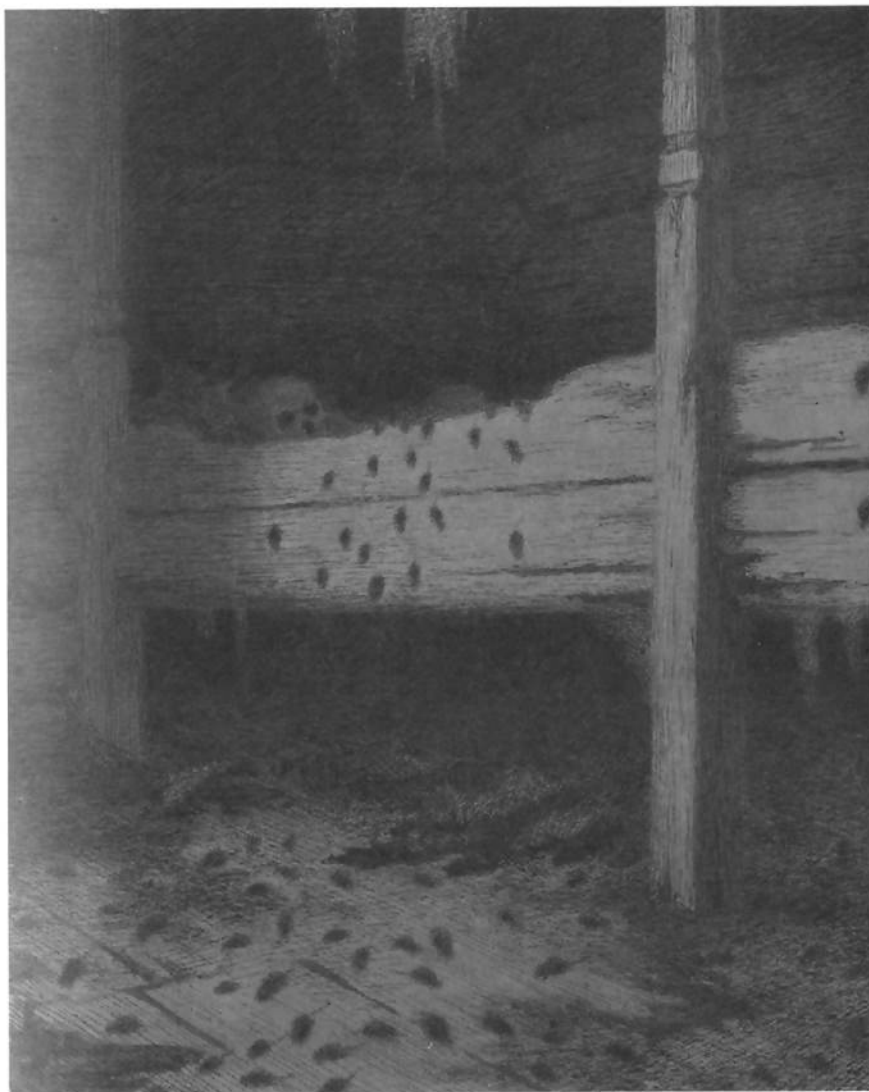
In 1900 Kittelsen published his opus magnum, a book entitled 'Svartedauen' (eng. 'The Black Plague'), which featured drawings and writing about the black plague pandemic, and the mythical creature *Pesta*. Kittelsen's gripping notions of what it must have been like to live in a country laid to waste, would by the turn of the century represent a renewed insight into this event. Something that had long been known to the general public as a chapter in the history books was transformed into a renewed familiarisation with the event and its personal sense of dread. Through his illustrations of *Pesta*¹³, Kittelsen managed to visualise the disease itself, along with the isolation and agony it inflicted on its victims. Technically, the illustrations of *Pesta* represent Kittelsen at his very best: the corresponding texts, design and drawing technique are carefully coordinated and kept in the same dark, melancholic ambience.

Kittelsen's further works on the plague show the repercussions of the disease, and the bleakness of the ensuing years. Many legends recount the story of a long forgotten house or church, discovered by a huntsman or wanderer, lost in the forest. Here, the forest gains a role to play long *after* the tragedy had passed. It was near his own home in Eggedal, Kittelsen came across some such derelict houses himself. Overgrown and deserted, the years of decay had taken a heavy toll; it was as if he had stumbled across the very farm in this legend, recounted by Andreas Faye in 'Musstad':

Downstairs he found traces of past events; over the hearth hung a pot, yet the coal had extinguished many ages ago. On the benches lay decomposing balls of yarn, and on the wall there was a bow and other weapons, everything covered with a century's worth of dust.

13

The last decade of the 19th century was rich in terms of lethal female figures in art and literature – Edvard Munch's *Madonna* (1894-1895) being one of them. A worse femme fatale than *Pesta* is nonetheless difficult to trace in European art.



Musstad. Illustration to *The Black Plague*, Theodor Kittelsen, 1894-1896. Wash technique, pencil, pen and black crayon on paper. Photo: Morten Thorkildson

Many black metal bands such as Burzum, Carpathian Forest, Satyricon and Taake to name a few, have used illustrations by Kittelsen on their record covers, contributing greatly to his images spreading beyond Norway. His series about the Black Plague is particularly popular.

Full of wonder he ascended the stairs to the first floor – and behold! As he entered, he found a number of beds, in each of which lay the skeletons of several individuals and swarms of mice, who, frightened by his coming, stormed about the loft in wild disorder. After the first dread had subsided, he proceeded to investigate the other buildings on the estate, and found every one of them in a similar fashion – just as the former occupants had left it, at their sudden demise.¹⁴

The 'Svartedauen' project held personal relevance for Kittelsen as he persistently returned to the legends connected to the plague. These stories seem to have nourished a battle he had with his own demons. The stories of *Pesta* laying the land fallow and spreading slow decay can be read as allegories for the way Kittelsen perceived life and existence. He was, by all accounts, a fascinating man who immediately attracted attention. He also held a strong bond with his wife Inga and was a devoted father to

their nine children. However, if he could seem easy-going and festive in social settings, he principally preferred keeping people at a distance. His urge to isolate himself and absorb himself in his own thoughts, is emphasized by a number of his acquaintances; Norwegian artist Christian Skredsvig, one of his dearest friends, believed Kittelsen to be the angriest man he knew of, disliking authorities and prone to feeling undervalued. Kittelsen was so proud, irritable and engaged with his own pursuits, that it is no wonder he preferred isolation, not only from the art scene in the capital, but also from close, convivial relations with people in his locale¹⁵. If we are open to such a perspective, it is not only a national disaster he portrays in 'Svartedauen'; he also unveils the darker aspects of his psyche and his fascination with death and oblivion, -something which



'Pesta' traverses the whole country, Theodor Kittelsen, 1904. Pencil, water color, coal and crayon on paper. Photo: Dag A. Ivarøy

¹⁴ Andreas Faye. *Norske Folke-Sagn*, 3. ed., Norsk Folkeminnelags Forlag, 1948 p. 135 (p. 8 in article, no markup)

¹⁵ Holger Koefoed, Einar Økland. *Th. Kittelsen. Kjente og ukjente sider ved kunstsneren*. J.M. Stenersens Forlag a.s. 1999, p. 284.

must have been made easier by the subject matter having originally taken place in so distant a time¹⁶. By portraying historical events through his art, he had the opportunity to cast himself far afield, to travel in time and space, so to say. In his biography on the artist, Odd Hølaas wrote: "He went all the way, through centuries of misty darkness, back to the Great Plague, to the land of death and pestilence, where there was nothing left of life, but the scream."¹⁷

Not before long, only spirits of darkness were to remain in these cold, lonely lands...¹⁸

Norwegian author Olav Klonteig has written that if a story is to become a legend and live on as a part of folklore, it must accommodate a deeper necessity, a fundamental human need. Consequently, art, language and culture emerge as fantastic expressions of mankind's quest to reflect upon its own existence. These narrative expressions are our way to leave our mark, to manifest our sense of being.

Kittelsen used primeval tales to explore the human condition, and while his source material might be traditional, borne from the psyche of his countrymen and spanning hundreds of years, his approach to them was distinctly modern. In many ways he was reflecting a concurrent expressionistic artistic tendency, represented by artists such as Edvard Munch, Vincent van Gogh and Emil Nolde. Although based on stories he had heard and read, Kittelsen drew the creatures of Norwegian folk beliefs as they *appeared* to him – in other words, they were greatly subjective. "All the elements in his art resemble something else, something that has been done, but no other artist resembles him," writer Einar Økland has stated. Historical events, legends and myths constitute the foundation of his motifs, yet at the same time they are transformed into personal encounters, fears and the general uncertainty of life. Though the motifs take place in a Norwegian setting, they speak to universal human themes. Consistently in Kittelsen's works, we are encouraged to use our senses and instincts to grasp the core of our existence, with the implication being that too much common sense may restrict such an understanding.

Nature as centre stage

In the poem, and illustration (pictured overleaf), that concludes Kittelsen's work on the black plague, it is a lone wood grouse that takes centre stage. The dread and horror has left, and is replaced by the wistful voice of the fairy tale narrator:

Where there is presently a forest, there was once a large village. People lived their lives there, and fields and meadows were lush and green with happy sounds of human voices and timbre from the bells of grazing cattle. Then, one day an ugly old hag came along, carrying with her a rake and a broom. Far, far

16 Holger Koefoed; Einar Økland. *Th. Kittelsen. Kjente og ukjente sider ved kunstneren*. J.M. Stenersens Forlag a.s. 1999, p. 166.

17 Odd Hølaas. *Th. Kittelsen. Den norske faun*. Gyldendal Norsk Forlag. Oslo 1959. p. 156-157.

18 Translated quote from Kittelsen's *Svartedauen*, chapter *Tiuren spiller* (eng. The wood grouse plays).

from a distant land she came, and wherever she set foot, every soul perished within days.

Not before long, only spirits of darkness were to remain in these cold, lonely lands. The 'draugr' howled and screamed at sea, 'nøkken' wailed in every tarn, and through the forests and from deep underground, the fairy folk came with laughter and dance, and then disappeared.

But in the evening, when darkness fell, the mighty gates of the high mountain opened, and out trudged the large and shaggy trolls. High up in the spruce top the wood grouse sits attentive, listening in on the fairy tale. The evening turns to pitch-black night and the slumbering bird vanishes into darkness - only a great black canvas prevails, with the moon's yellow, wondering face, peering down onto the scenery. Yet, at the first break of dawn, the great bird fluffs its feathers and bellows out its wild song, above this solitary landscape with all its mysterious tales. Then, the wood grouse makes merry.¹⁹

While *Pesta* was tied to her deed, as a product of a specific era, the grouse is timeless. In making the bird a natural extension of the treetops, Kittelsen sustains its natural habitat in the Norwegian woods - together, they make one reflexive being. We see the stars twinkle faintly in the night sky, while the horizon gently begins to brighten - regardless of human demise, the light of day swiftly returns.

Many of Kittelsen's images have now become popular resources for the Norwegian souvenir industry and are heavily referenced in popular culture. Yet, ironically, it was not Kittelsen's aim to create images that served as representations of a collective national perception of nature. He wanted to *get away from people*. When he returned from periods of solitude, he would show the public not just *what* he had seen, but *how* he had seen it; landscape formations could be trolls, animals could be people in disguise and a tussock in a forest lake could be a lethal water demon. Nature to Kittelsen could be both playful and dangerous, but it was never to be trifled with²⁰. In Kittelsen's art, as he himself proclaimed, it is the very earth we find "groaning and crying and wailing."²¹ Nature thus becomes a projection of human fear, hope and longing, for which folklore provides a tangible framework. This notion may seem foreign to us today. When reading legends and fairy tales we must - as Kittelsen - take into account that human culture and our perception of reality, is perpetually on the move. Kittelsen's artistic interpretations of these narratives are simple, yet they still effectively challenge our understanding and perception of reality - just because we cannot see something, does not mean it does not exist.

19 Theodor Kittelsen. *Svartedauen*. Unpaginated *Tiuren spiller*.

20 Holger Koefoed; Einar Økland. *Th. Kittelsen. Kjente og ukjente sider ved kunstneren*. J.M. Stenersens Forlag a.s. 1999, p. 291

21 Theodor Kittelsen. *Svartedauen*. Bjørn Ringstrøms antikvariat, facsimile edition, Oslo, 1993 Unpaginated. Chapter 'Hun farer landet rundt'



The Wood Grouse Plays. Illustration to *The Black Plague*, Theodor Kittelsen, 1894-1896. Wash technique, pencil, pen and black crayon on paper. Photo:

Dag A. Ivarsøy

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Architecture and Design, Oslo

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alherdeel



WHO ARE YOU?

Alkerdeel, which is Nieke, Pui, Pede & QW.

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

East-Flanders, Meetjesland more specific. Our rehearsal place is in an agricultural area, we actually practice in a farm, the old pig-stable. Lots of fields and nature around, we recently noticed six deer running across the street. Don't know if there were drugs involved.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

We used to describe our music as *filthy-blacksludgedronedoom*. As 3/4th of the band are parents by now, thus more at peace with themselves, the description black/doom will also do.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

The smelly mud that gets squeezed through the ribs of your shoe soles when walking through the fields, that's us.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

I don't know. We never re-decorated our rehearsal place, so we only know the cur-

rent surrounding.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

The politically correct me would say: "not at all", but that's not true. Although most of the band have lived or still live in the city, we're children of the corn. We only like what is alive and has some kind of stench.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

Yes. The moment during free fall, after your feet lost their last grip. Without a parachute. Also that specific touch of the ground.

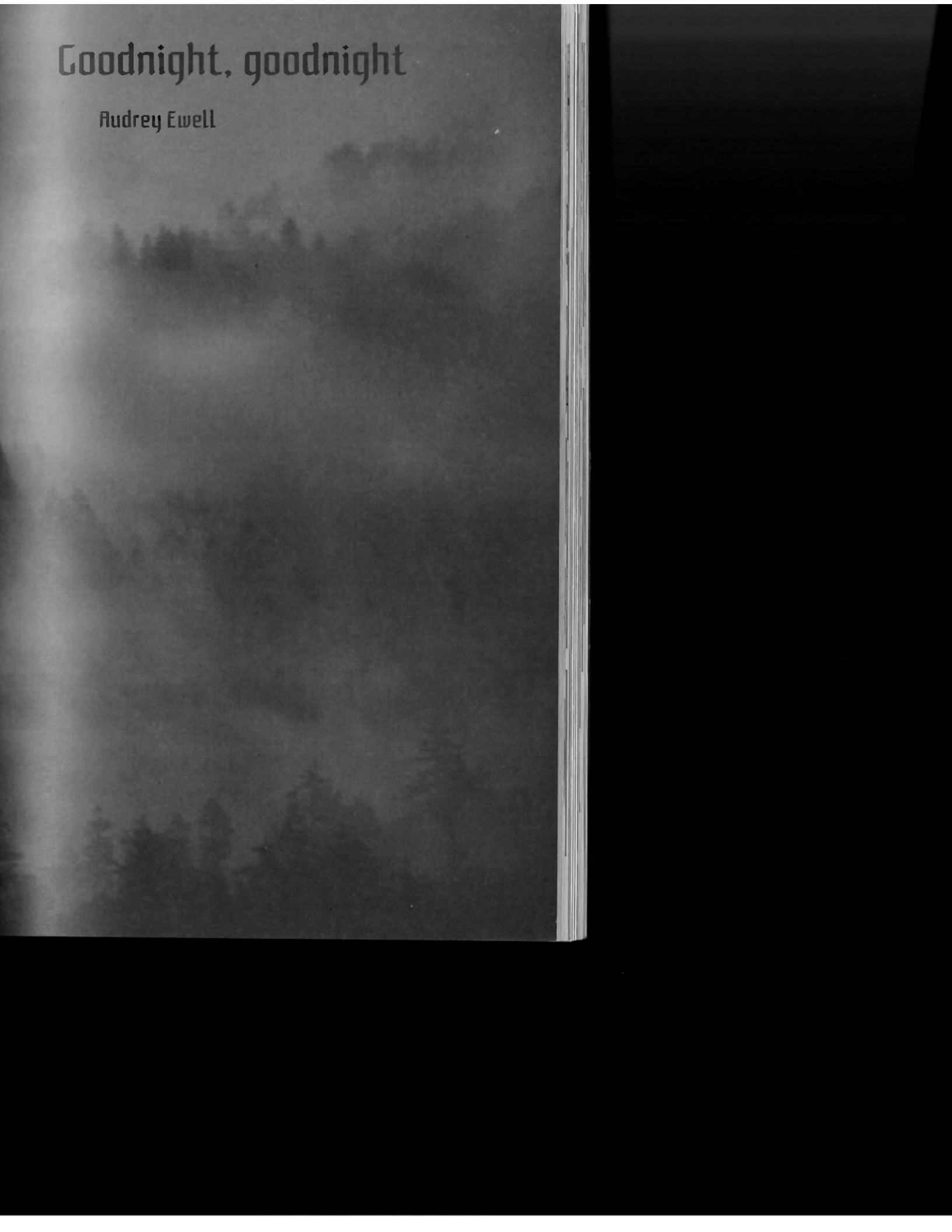
DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?

Our old rehearsal place was a garage and there was a lawnmower in the corner. Now we practice in a barn and there's a BMW. True story. As everybody with a knowledge of sound knows, each object in the room has its influence.



Goodnight, goodnight

Audrey Ewell



Oslo, Winter, 2002

Night

All I know is that it's cold, it's dark, and there's snow everywhere, crunching under our boots as we move around to stay warm. Oslo's city lights twinkle below us. We're in a skiing area that Gylve Nagell, aka Fenriz, drummer and lyricist of Darkthrone, frequents. He's not with us at the moment. It's just Aaron and I, and our friend John from San Francisco who's helping us film for a few months. We shiver, and slowly pan across the landscape below. Forest blankets the middle ground between us and the lights. These shots will end up being some of the first in *Until The Light Takes Us*, our documentary about Norwegian black metal. "Establishing shots." *This is where we are.* Oslo is a city nestled amongst trees. And then there is the fjord. There is water here. Trees and water, and a city within. It's cold and beautiful.

Tokyo, May, 2008

Golden hour

Warm light washes into the hotel room as the sun begins to set. We're on a high floor, and there's a nice view over Tokyo. We arrived that morning so we're jet lagged, and a little out of it. In two days we'll be screening a teaser of *Until The Light Takes Us*, at a joint book launch with photographer Peter Beste. Aaron wrote the foreword for Peter's portrait book of black metal musicians. The organizers, a group of Japanese designers and promoters, have also brought Ted Skjellum, aka Nocturno Culto of Darkthrone, to DJ the party.

The first day in Japan is a whirlwind of meetings, sight-seeing, and sorting out details, but now, at the hotel, Aaron and I have stolen a few moments of quiet. We lie in bed, in the minimally furnished room, our backs to each other: I face the wall, and he faces the window. Our bodies touching, we drift into our own thoughts.

It's in that moment, between sleep and wakefulness, that Aaron sees the man. He sits in his shirtsleeves on a couch that isn't there. He stares at Aaron.

New York, April 2016

9 a.m.

We're in our high-rise apartment in Hell's Kitchen, and the doctor we've flown out from California is just arriving. He's a cancer specialist, a medical doctor, and a naturopath. He's here to save Aaron's life.

Aaron looks at me from his hospital bed in the living room. "I don't want to go in the water," he says, urgent.

A friend who is there to help looks at me. He knows what this means.

I lean over Aaron and gently touch his face. "There's no water, honey. No one's going to put you in any water." He relaxes. Something inside me breaks a little more, something that can never be fixed.

Months back, when Aaron first got the news that he had cancer, he started dreaming that he was falling backward into a pool of water. This was death: his death. Aaron didn't want to die, he was afraid to die. He told me many times that he feared the water, as he feared his own death. Getting him to bathe or even accept sponge baths became a battle. I thought it was all just a metaphor. I thought I knew the rules.

Tokyo, May, 2008 Golden Hour

Flickering blue light illuminates the man, as if he's watching TV. But there's no television in the room. He stares at Aaron.

Oblivious to all of this, facing the other wall, I feel Aaron stroking my hair. "That's nice," I think. I love this man completely, and have always felt so lucky that we get to travel the world together, with our films. His fingers play gently with my hair and I contentedly close my eyes.

I find out later that Aaron was frozen at this time, unable to move, looking in the other direction.

Charlestown, New Hampshire, 1982 Afternoon

I look down from a great height. I've climbed to the top of the tree again. I'm in the woods behind my family's double-wide. I'm six years old. In the trailer, hidden from view, my mother, a few siblings and her abusive boyfriend are doing god-knows-what. For now I am above it all, cradled in the arms of the tree, with a bird's eye view of the woods below. I watch as wind gently swirls through it all. Leaves dip and rise, needles glint in the sunlight. I am safe here, high above the ground, camouflaged in the branches.

New York, April 2016 Close to Midnight

I've never lived so high up. Aaron's hospital bed is set up in the living room. But he can't see the view out of our 43rd floor apartment with its wall-to-wall windows. Just clouds, and the planes taking people away, bringing them home. I don't ask if he, like

me, is reminded of all the places we've been. Later, I'll regret this: regret not talking about the life we shared.

Late at night, before the overnight aide shows up, I sit at the table by the window and prepare that night's medicine timetable. From this height, the twinkling lights of the cars below stretch like a sparkling necklace all up and down Ninth Avenue. It looks like Christmas down there. I turn back to Aaron, lying in that bed, breathing ragged breaths. My heart breaks for the 100th time that day. I won't lose him. I won't give up. I walk to him and kiss his forehead. "I love you," I tell him. "I love you too," he rasps back. I tell him he doesn't need to tell me. His eyes, the man inside, give me a look. He has never once, in our fifteen years together, let me say it without also saying it to me. I've never once had to guess.

Oslo, Autumn 2001 Afternoon

It's peaceful in these woods. Gylve has brought Aaron and me to a place he goes walking. There's a slight autumn chill, and we wear light jackets in the photos. Things feel like an adventure but right now, between Aaron and I, there is some uncertainty. We don't quite know what we are to each other.

The forest calms us with a serenity that resonates through our bones. The flow of time and history slows, ceases to matter, is eternal. We walk amid the green and brown, listen to wind and birds, and watch sunlight dapple the grass. This heals. In a clearing, a small copse of trees forms a circle.

We're not filming. But there are photos from that day. A few. I'm grateful for every record of a shared past of which I am now the sole keeper. Anything forgotten is lost, forever. Anything I can hold in my memory lives on, an inhabitable space that I can slip into, feel the emotions as if it was happening now, and know again what it felt like to be alive in that time and place, with those people. With him.

In the photos we're all smiling.

New York, April 27, 2016 The End of Time

Aaron is weak. I've brought him to the cancer infusion center where he gets weekly blood transfusions.

Sorting this was a battle. Everything has been a battle for months, but I accomplished this. When the doctors in Boston refused to treat him, I set up a medevac to NY, where I found him an oncologist to start him on a new treatment. I set up his NY insur-

ance, got him admitted to a hospital to get him into the system, battled to get these weekly blood transfusions. I organized a schedule of nursing aides to help me care for him at home. I organized in-home physical therapists as well as nurses to give him fluids, so he wouldn't have to go to the hospital as much, something he desperately hated. I recruited scientist friends to help me research conventional and alternative options. I found cancer nutrition experts, scientists, doctors, specialists and I raised funds online to pay for all of it, and borrowed more when that wasn't enough.

I barely slept. I barely ate. I spent every moment either with him or researching options and reaching out to anyone who could help save his life. Later I will hold onto this evidence of my perseverance. I will know that it was not humanly possible to have done more. I will hold onto that as I sob throughout the coming hours, days, weeks, and months. But I will still catalogue it like this, here, because a part of me will never think I did enough. Because the next morning, Aaron died.

Tokyo, May 2008 Golden Hour

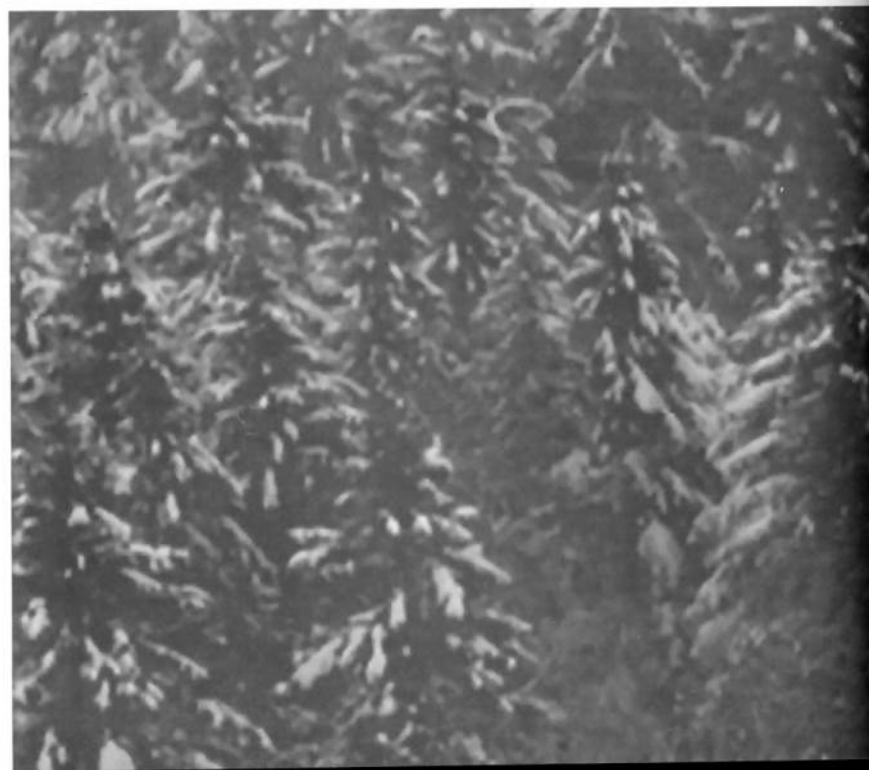
The room is silent.

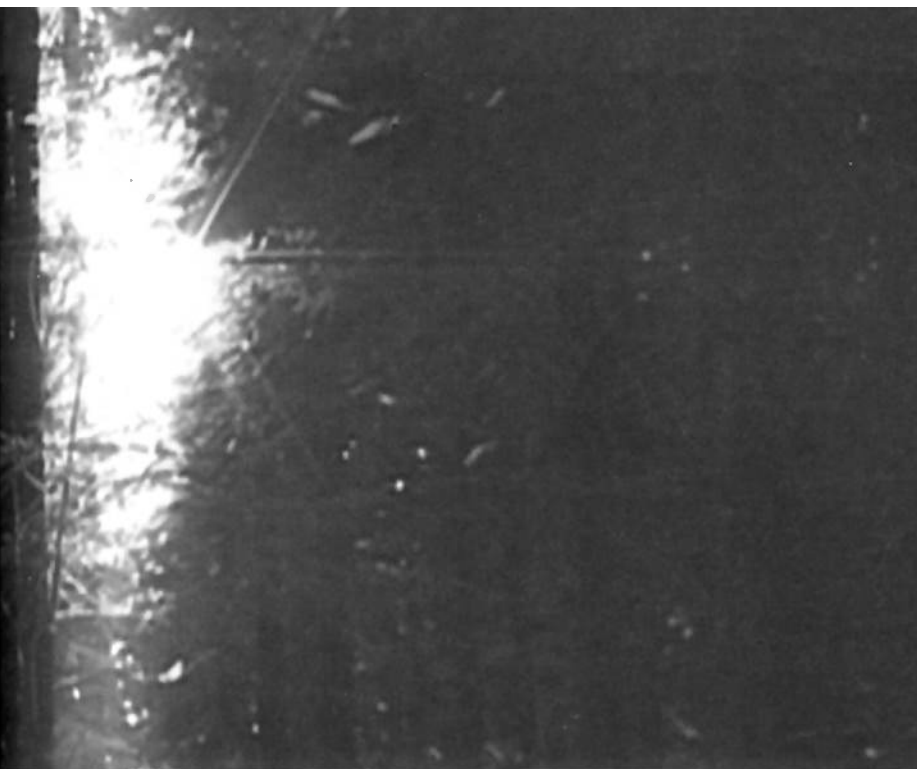
The man stares at Aaron from a couch that doesn't exist, with the blue light of a nonexistent television playing on his face. Fingers in my hair, stroking. Aaron struggles, but succeeds in rolling over to face me where I lay, my eyes still fixed on the wall. Something feels wrong. I can't move. Aaron watches as fingers part my hair and a woman's face emerges from the back of my head. Her face contorts into a scream, which only Aaron can hear. Everything feels bad. I want Aaron. I struggle and turn to him, and we lie there, holding each other's gaze, immobilised.

Directly over our heads, on the wall, a phone rings. The spell is broken. The blue light, the man, the screaming woman: they all vanish, and we can move again. We don't know what just happened, but we do know something impossible has just occurred.

April 28, 2016 Morning

The night aide wakes me and tells me Aaron's heart rate has been dropping. I'd set up a very strict schedule of checking his vitals throughout the night. I race into the living room and check his heart rate. It's dangerously low. OMG. *Why didn't she wake me sooner??* I rage silently, grab my phone and call 911. *I'll need things for the hospital*, I think. *He'll need sweatpants and changes of underwear*. Moments later, a knock at the door: a police officer I've seen in the neighbourhood. He rushes in, and starts pressing on Aaron's chest. The aide holds Aaron's nose as I breathe into his mouth. Flakes of dried food residue or crushed pills blow back into my mouth from his.





all film stills from *Until the Light Takes Us* (2008)



We keep at it until the paramedics, an endless stream of large, fast-moving and efficient men, pour into the living room. There's a flurry of activity. They move Aaron onto the floor. I step back, sit, and watch. The paramedics work furiously on his frail body. This goes on for a very long time. At a certain point, I know that Aaron will be irrevocably brain damaged if he survives, and as his health care proxy, I wonder what he would want. We never talked about this possibility. But I also know that if there's any chance for him to survive this, I won't stop them. I believe that I'm thinking coolly and levelly and trying to make the best decision for him, but I've almost certainly gone into shock. They set up the paddles, and electricity surges through him. And again. And again. One of the paramedics is on the phone with a doctor. The aide and I hear something that makes us flash a look at each other: *Did they just say he'll pull through?* But none of this matters. At 8:58 a.m., they call it.

He's gone.

I sit on the floor for hours, cradling my beloved for the last time, waiting for the funeral home to arrive. A detective asks me questions; I answer them. The paramedics pack up their gear and leave. I sit on the floor with Aaron, I rest my hand on his thigh, and I watch as the body of the man I know so well, and have loved for so long, slowly becomes an object. I let our cats and dogs out of the bedroom so they can see the body of their papa, so they will understand that he didn't leave us, hasn't abandoned us. That it was nature, or whatever name the alien invader that is cancer was going by these days, that had stolen him from us.

Before they leave, I overhear the paramedics talking. I hear one of them say "fluid in his lungs." Aaron had, for all intents and purposes, drowned.

Tokyo, May 2008 Sunset

We don't know how much time has passed, but the sun is low in the sky. Deep golden light pours into the room, casting long shadows. Aaron and I shakily sit up in bed.

At the reception desk, neither of us wants to be the one to tell the polite staff why we are requesting a different room. Our hosts had put us up here, and pre-booked the week, so it wasn't an option to leave altogether. We don't want to seem crazy, but we can't spend another moment in that room. The staff insist that we tell them what's wrong with it. Finally, I blurt out that the room is haunted. Despite what we've just experienced, I feel like a crazy person for saying it. They just look at me, then at Aaron. He nods. They speak to each other in Japanese while we wait.

A man steps forward, and says he'll show us to our new room. We're full of defiant shame.

Back upstairs, we quickly gather our things. The porter escorts us down the hall, around the bend to an elevator, and then down another hall, to a new room. Several times, I ask him if any other guests have ever said anything about this sort of thing happening. "No," he answers, each time. I ask again. Again he says no. Finally, as we approach the door to our new room, I try once more: "No one has EVER said anything like this? This has never happened before?" He looks at me. He looks at Aaron. Quietly, he says: "This doesn't usually happen until the autumn." He won't say more. He opens our door and leaves.

Later, at the offices of our hosts, they see us and literally say "You look like you've seen a ghost." We tell them what happened. They laugh and don't believe it, but they go online and search the hotel's name and "ghost." It comes up as one of the most haunted sites in Japan.

This is the point where I would leave this story. But Aaron always wanted to continue with the part we learned six months later, about what had happened there.

New York, Sept 10, 2016 Night

I'm at Trans Pecos, a showspace on the Brooklyn-Queens border, waiting for the Inga Copeland show to start. She, like most of the music I love, was introduced to me by Aaron. I've been writing a ghost film, or rather a film with ghosts, primarily to the music of her, Fever Ray and Fennesz. Aaron's been dead four and a half months, and I'm not in a very good place.

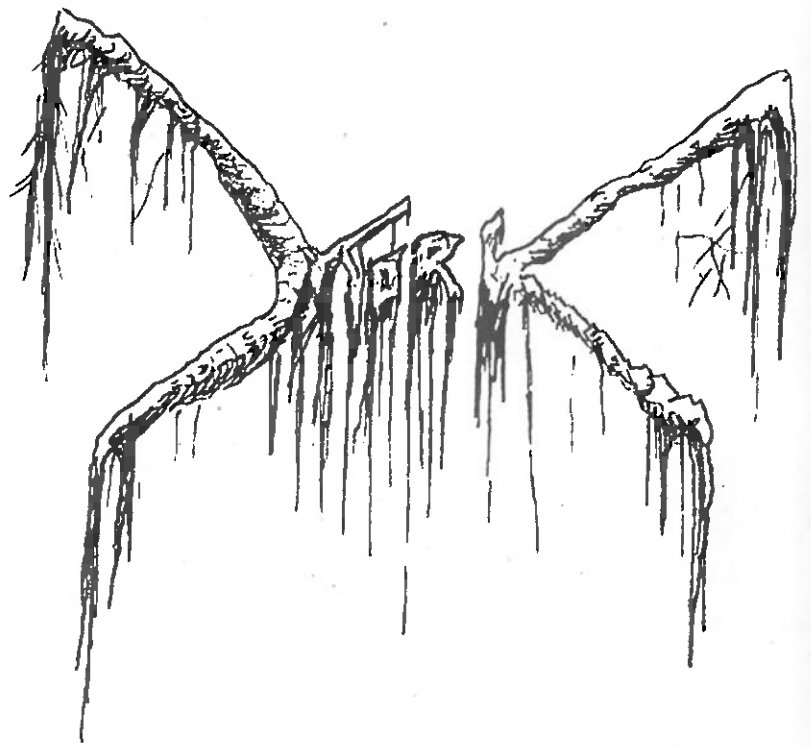
It's only the thought of making this film to honor him, and the fact of having to care for our animals, that keeps me going.

I walk outside to the courtyard and find my friend. We look up and there is a truly massive tree towering over us. It looks prehistoric. Gnarled and tangled, its branches rise hundreds of feet into the air and extend deep into the night sky. I think about how much history this tree must have witnessed. The Native Americans who first lived on this land, the Dutch settlers who next moved in, working families, hipsters, and now me and my friend, standing in the backyard of this club, my heart fractured into a million pieces and wondering how to go on, and my friend perhaps wishing he knew better how to help.

The tree stands, a silent witness to all the human drama that has played out over the hundreds of years of its life. It simply is.

People start to go in for the show, and I move quickly to join.

*



WHO ARE YOU?

Thomas Eriksen, creator of Mork (est. 2004). No alter-ego needed, I am myself in any circumstance.

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

I am an inhabitant and child of Halden, which is located close to the Swedish border in the Norwegian county of Østfold. Not in the high terrain of mountains and such, but rather the flat and wooded area of eastern Norway. Situated between Oslo and Gothenburg.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

I am a music and songwriter. I have made several kinds of music, but I am currently mainly focusing on black metal with my project Mork. Mork is a one-person-band where I do everything. I create the vision and the totality of the product; sound, music, lyrics, imagery and so on. However there is a fully assembled live band, also, where I have friends with me to make Mork into a live concert-act.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

At first I was a bit careful not to label my own music as "true" Norwegian black metal. Now after some time I am more confident in the music I create and can with certainty call it "True Norwegian Black Metal". The imagery and presentation is dark, atmospheric and influenced by "nekro", the forest, hate and dark themes.

The band logo was hand drawn by me back when I begun this black metal journey and is based on roots and moist forest-floors. The name derives from "rot" and "decay". This suits the sound and atmosphere perfectly, in my mind.

I am also the creative mind behind the album artworks. As I said, I have the full

vision of Mork and its spawning's.

The stage is basically just a backdrop with the Mork logo. Sometimes I bring some candles and smoke.

The band-members all wear corpse paint to heighten the atmosphere and also as a tribute to the original Norwegian black metallers.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

Well, I have been writing music for almost two decades now. I have noticed that surroundings actually have an impact on the creative flow. But I never know what to look for. If I, for example, write music in one room or place it can have a free flow for a while, but all of a sudden it can get drained of inspiration. If I then change location I may get into the flow again. But, I never know. For all I know it could just be in my mind and on a day-to-day basis. But like most songwriters and creative people, I do tend to have good and bad periods of creativity.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

Since I am from a place where my genre (black metal) is not a regular form of music from before, I have had to built experiences and evolved all on my own. I have not been inflicted by a "scene" or other "black metal songwriters". This is a good thing, I would say. To me black metal is a solitary activity. I am an only child and I write music alone. I don't think Mork would have been as good if things were different. Or, I wouldn't have been as pleased with the outcome as I currently am.

To be making black metal in Norway, and being Norwegian, all fits perfectly. It



Photo by Ståle Malnes

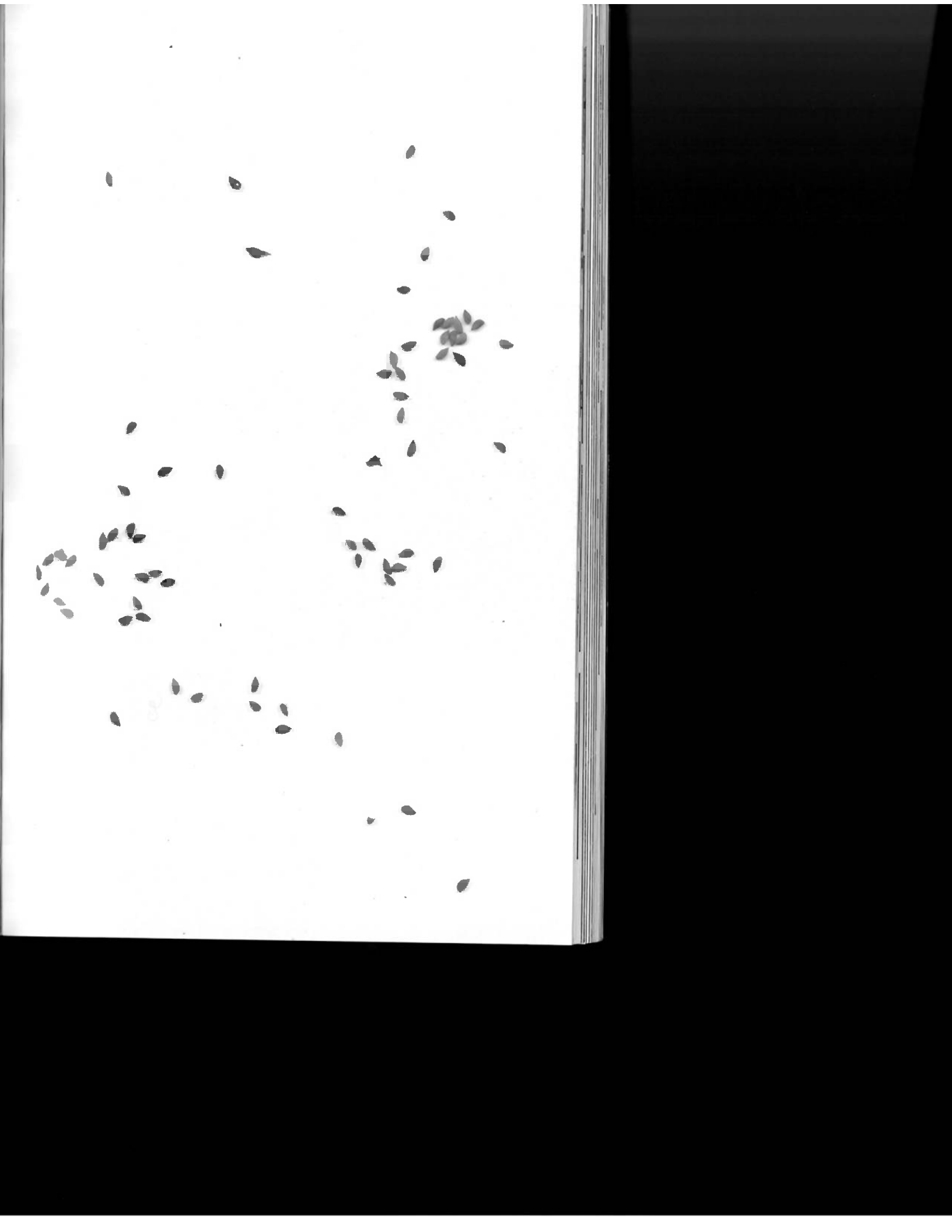
feels really natural to me. I know there are people all around the world who are inspired by "true Norwegian black metal", so I couldn't have been happier to be a Norwegian. Since I didn't grow up in the western or northern parts of the country, amongst mountains and fjords, I guess I have been influenced by the wooded eastern parts.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

I picture the darkness of the deep forest and the unknown evils within. I feel there's a mystique and atmosphere inside the dark woods of Norway. An eerie and cold place where an intense hatred of mankind lies. With the atmosphere and production of my music I feel I do make a gateway into the mind to this unholy wooded kingdom.

DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?

That would be the time I visited Dark-throne's recording/rehearsal-room back during the summer of 2013. I created my debut album after that very visit. As well as the feel I get when walking through the woods or on a trail. I have to admit not being a nature-guy. I don't do much hiking and such at all. But the few times I do seek out the woods, it's very intense. This may be a positive thing, when I think of what I told you about "draining" a room for inspiration. If I were to be a hiking-person, I probably would feel less and less inspiration in the forests.







Sebastian Rusten, Rotvelt, technical pen, 2017

Z4006: MAPPING THE NORWAY SPRUCE'S DNA

Una Hamilton Helle

As tree-clad nations, Norway and Sweden's forests are a major resource in their economies. Wood is used as building material and firewood and to produce ethanol, vanillin, paper and fuel - as well contributing to a large part of the Northern Hemisphere's biomass and photosynthesis. It is therefore unsurprising that funding was made available to a team of scientists at the University of Umeå in Sweden to sequence the Norway spruce genome, a project that was completed in 2013.

The Norway spruce DNA sequencing project is one of the largest such project attempted to date, as its genome contains a whopping seven times more information than the human genome. The project would require a huge amount of data power, and was even at the current technological development rate, limited by what equipment was available.

As DNA sequencing has become more manageable, different specimens of the plant kingdom have been mapped out, including rice, red algae and the balsam poplar tree. The human genome was the first of all vertebrates to be fully sequenced in 2000. The Norway spruce project, however, produced the same amount of data in a week as the human genome project produced in ten years!

The data build up during the project would end up becoming so large that it couldn't be backed up during the decoding process - it could not be handled by the Swedish national data storage system. Luckily, the end product is not as large and is easily stored as a huge but manageable computer file. This file maps out the spruce trees internal make up can be decoded and filtered according to the computer programme used to read it.

The tree used for the experiment stands on the grounds of the University of Umeå. It was root-grafted from a tree in Jämtland (Central Sweden) in 1959 and bears the name Z4006.

To start the sequencing process, needles were taken from Z4006 and the DNA extracted in the laboratory. Liquid nitrogen was used to keep the sample intact and to freeze in time any processes that might occur post-picking the sample. The DNA was then fed into a machine that churned the data around for a week. The resulting files were processed by computers, which deduced from it a string of letter combinations of the letters A, G, T & C; the building blocks of all DNA.

The Norway spruce DNA project produced the same amount of data in a week as the human genome project produced in ten years

Laboratory equipment where DNA is extracted from organic samples. The sample from Z4006 was processed in the 'washing machine' for a week in order to be ready for analysis.



DNA is structured around complementary base pairs, represented by the two twirling coils in the well-known graphic, and also by the aforementioned sequence of letters. Base pairs are of varying length and number, and once these were printed out the job started with matching them up into the correct sequence.

As no one knows what this sequence looks like at the start of a project, this can be quite a challenge. The process could be compared to scrambling up all the sentences of a book and then having to reassemble the story piece by piece, having never read the book in the first place. This is in addition to eliminating any alien DNA present in the mix, such as fungi that might have been attached to the original tree sample.

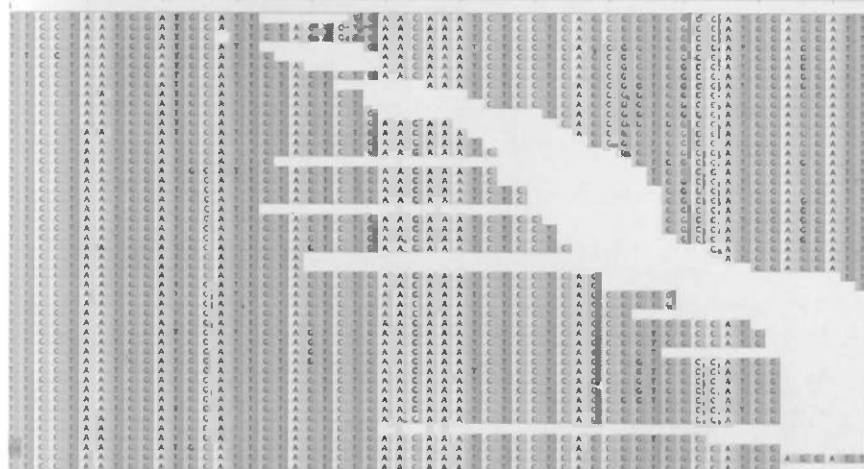
Many speculations were made before the sequencing project took place as to why the genome was so large - were there secret defence mechanisms or memory genes in the spruce that we did not know, for example? In the end, the team found that despite the genome's large size, the tree has a similar amount of genes to humans. Rather than inhabiting any hitherto unknown properties, the Norway spruce genome consists of many repetitive DNA sequences.

The tree lacks the filtering process humans and animals inhabit, and cannot rid itself of any excess genetic information. This could be a product of having existed as a species for 300 million years (in comparison, homo sapiens have been around for 200,000 years), each tree having such a long lifespan, spanning from decades to centuries and inbreeding.

The tree lacks the filtering process humans and animals inhabit and cannot rid itself of any excess genetic information

Sweden and Norway have mass planted and re-planted trees for forestry since the early 1910s, but trees are, for obvious reasons, a slow-moving investment. The sequencing of the Norway spruce genome has opened up for future endeavours to genetically modify the spruce tree, in order to make it more durable and economically viable. As technology develops in the next 10-20 years, we will be able to map out more and more of the natural world around us. We will be able to predict how trees will react to their environment, as well tailor their genetic make up for particular climates. The secrets of the forest will be opened up to us on a scale previously unimaginable - who knows what we might find?

Thanks to Stefan Jansson, Professor in the Department of Plant Physiology at Umeå University, and Hugh Cross, Research Scientist at the Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research, who spoke to me about how the Norway spruce DNA was sequenced.



its currently on screen

The Norway Spruce genome sequencing pattern, a seemingly never-ending stream of the letters A, G, T & C.





NEXVESSEL

WHO ARE YOU?

My name is Mat "Kvohst" McNerney. I am the singer/songwriter in the bands Hexvessel and Grave Pleasures. Before that I used to be in the bands Code and Dødheimsgard. I have gone by the name of Kvohst for some time now which I suppose is some sort of "spirit name."

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

I live on the outskirts of Tampere in Finland, just at the start of some forest land, before the city ends. I live in a small wooden house that was built in the 1930s, and sits on top of some large rocks. I have been renovating it back to the old style, using just wood and natural insulation and old techniques. The climate here is sub-arctic but the winters are relatively mild for a place so far north. We get temperatures of maybe -20 at the coldest part of winter. That's nothing really. I used to live in Lapland and it could get as cold as -50. For us this place has all the best parts of living in the north and it's our favourite city in Finland. It's not a big city compared with London but it still has enough of the amenities that makes living and working internationally possible. As much as I'd like to remove myself from society and go to the forest, I work as a musician and I need to be able to get to an airport without driving for a whole day.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

I am a singer and a songwriter. I play guitar in Hexvessel too but in Grave Pleasures I just sing. My music with Hexvessel can be described as psychedelic forest folk rock and the music with Grave Pleasures is post-punk with an apocalyptic theme. I don't indulge my mind in genre specific terminology for what I do. I see art as the highest form of magic possible. Art is magic and for me music is the most

potent art-form. Music is ancient as we are and it's synonymous with us. I aspire to perform magic. That's basically how I would describe what I work for. I think that if you're in it for other reasons, you don't get my respect. The best artists are also magicians.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

The visual expression of the music is intrinsic to the ideas and concepts within it. You cannot have one without the other I believe. There are forms of music that rely solely on the music alone - such as classical music for example. But what we are doing has meaning in the words, the images that are placed beside and within it. In that way I could refer back to what I said about music being magic. The visual expression of the art form is another aid, another key or tool to open those magical doors. You could, I suppose, go into that other world with music alone. But with the whole package (imagery, logo, album covers, stage presence/ set up ...) you are sure to be entering that other universe a lot easier and more powerfully. It's about immersion. There is a tendency in this modern world to listen casually to music. I'm not casual about music, in the same way I am not casual about drugs or sex. I believe in these things as holy sacraments that should be respected and taken seriously. I believe that art moves, changes and shapes universes. And so when thinking about the experience around the music, I believe that it should be like an altar, a holy place where everything is an adornment or a pathway into the magical journey contained within. It's a red carpet if you like, protruding from the doorway of another world. If it's laid out correctly then it's already the beginning of that journey already just to view

it. I remember album covers for example when I was a kid, that I would stare at and would transport me to another place, without even hearing the music. Even the name of Siouxsie and The Banshees would conjure such wild imaginary things in my mind, without even hearing a note of the music. I was afraid to even put the record on the player when I discovered that record at my uncle's house. When I eventually heard Iron Maiden I was so disappointed that they weren't frightening at all to me, since I had been staring in terror at the Aces High poster so many times when I would be in Woolworths with my mum, that years later the music failed to meet my wild expectations. Of course I love Iron Maiden now, but the point is that artwork and imagery should be the open mouth of your work, the eye that stares back.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

I am utterly influenced by everything always. I don't think there's a cut off point for that creative process. I have learnt now that Hexvessel, for example, is music that is created while I live. If I don't have time in between the tours and recording in the studio etc then I don't have time for contemplation and to gain new experiences. The richest form of inspiration for me is in the forest and during summer camping expeditions. I actually recorded some rhythm ideas for the new album while walking on the moss floor of the forest. The sound of the feet and the flowing rivers and streams, the wood cracking beneath your feet all has this kind of cosmic beat to it. It's that life sound and rhythm that I am tapping into when I am writing music.

I have several songs on the last album

that were inspired by ancient swamps. I'm quite fascinated by those ancient pagan holy sites. I think the reason that I am so interested in them over say other religious places, is that often pagan sites were functional spaces where people would meet, burials or sacrifices would take place or they believed that something magical would take place there. These were living places rather than simply an abandoned place. I always feel that Christian churches feel very devoid of life. They're not communal spaces but rather meant to be exclusive. And so my art is more about that transportation from these holy places. If I can capture them into music somehow, or bring some resonance from those places into the sounds then I think I will be able to somehow bring people there and to experience what those ancient people believed in. The belief and conviction that nature is godliness and the be all and end all of life.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROSESS?

I don't really believe in "where I am from." I like to believe that I am a combination of nature and nurture. I am made of my experiences but the vessel that contains those experiences is of course shaped by the place I came from. I cannot deny that my heritage and DNA has an influence over the way I experience things and the way I am influenced. Of course it does. I don't think my message has much to do with that, but I am sure critics could say otherwise. For me, it's about following my vision and it's for others to consider the origins and influences of that. Sometimes an artist has to die before you understand the significances of these things. All autobiographies are fictional in some way, you know. I could make more or less of the

importance of where I come from in my art, but you would never be able to trust me. In that respect I always look more for the message and concept. I never liked English Literature as an academic subject because we always had to explore every possible reason why an author had written what he had written. I disliked pulling open the curtains on that Wizard Of Oz. Sometimes the magic for me is in the mystery. Is it the art or the origins of the art that's important? My message is that nature is your home. So for me it's far more important to do away with origins and connect us all in that truth. The only thing we can know for sure is that we are all made up of this universe, and when we cease to be, we will return back to the universe. We're all from the Earth.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

I enter the universe. The real universe. The one we live in is simply a man-made construct. It's not real. When you think about ancient pagans living in harmony with their surroundings then you might be able to imagine what it must have been like to really be alive, living in the moment and knowing reality. That's where music takes me. It strips down the barriers and breaks these reality tunnels that man has made and let's me see things for what they are. We aren't taught as kids to see reality, just the reality that we have decided to live in. We're taught how to manage with that reality. That's why war is ultimately so terrifying, not because of the death, horror and mutilations it brings, but more importantly because it will change our commonly defined reality forever. We're not long-term thinking creatures. We don't make long term plans. That's what's so fascinating about the ancient

Egyptians for example. They made pyramids that can be seen from space. They made structures that lasted centuries and taught people from the distant future about their customs and beliefs. That's way more than we could ever hope to do with our temporal lives of glass and plastic. Long after we have been eradicated by the erosive and corroding weather we have stirred up with our destructive lifestyles, they will have almost no evidence of our so-called "culture." In that way I think reality is a definition, which must be continually fought for and must be a long term species-wide generational project. We would have to think long term. I like space travel as a concept for that because those vast distances of space tell us that we would have to think of those journeys and those colonisation projects as generational things. That shows us by pure deduction from the best of our senses that we have to work together as a species if we are to survive in the long term. So when I think about the best music, it teaches me about things like that. It shows me that through our shared ability to transcend our reality, our fake institutionalised mentality, through sound, we really are capable of something more. Wordless communication. No language needed aside from the changes in our brainwaves. I mean, there's proof that shaman drums have certain frequencies when they resonate that change brain chemistry when they are played, so much so that it shows up on brain scanning images. If you can alter biology through sound then why not change reality with it too? I like that when they pick up the frequencies of Jupiter's storms for example, they hear it as music. The universe is talking to us through sound, if we listen then I think we might come closer to a form of reality that will allow us as a species to live forever.

DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF
WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A
SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLU-
ENCED YOUR MUSIC?

I think the whole of the Iron Marsh EP was inspired by a certain marshland swamp that we travelled to one summer. We left a symbolic sacrifice there. It was a sacrificial place. There's a kind of iron called "bog iron" that is like an impure form of iron deposit that is present in some swamps like that. The iron is oxidized to ferric hydroxide upon encountering the oxidizing environment of the surface. The ground water that emerges is often reddish colour. They have found bodies there sometimes, very well preserved by the special conditions in the peat of those swamps. So the reddish colour gives them the look of blood and eerie quality. Nobody knows why the bodies were there. Some research has indicated that they have blows to the skull, which might mean that they were murdered or perhaps it's criminals who have been executed there. They could also be sacrifices. I was caught in a rapture about the mystery of these swamps. They can be so ancient and so full of life and death at the same time. The name also has a double meaning because I get strength from going to those places. I feel renewed. And so it's almost like calling the record "invincible swamp memory." If you are one with nature, I think you will become invincible.





DUSK IS NOT A GOOD TIME TO GO TO THE SUPERMARKET

Lotte Brown



"The house is protected by 77 Nordic Spruces.

There is no need for an alarm system." The woman tells me.

On the first day we fix the fence. We wear our rubber boots. The fence is just a wire to deter deer. Deer have been foraging on the spruces. We intervene to protect them. When the work is completed she leaves me alone for many days, weeks and months until the trees have leaves and flies knock daily against the glass windows and fry on the terrace, hot from the summer sun.

She said I should not open the door if the bell rings unexpectedly.

The deliverymen know by now. Apart from a couple of evangelists who once braved the wilderness and the long trek up the drive, no one comes here without invitation. She did not open the door for them. They left a leaflet on the threshold.

It was about God.

The house is high in the foothills of an expansive mountain range, wooded all around. It was built so that a lone distant mountain is always visible through tall, wide windows. Outside, in front of the windows, a stone terrace runs the length of the house.

In the beginning I keep the curtains drawn against the wilderness.

Perhaps there are bears in the forest.

I had read about bears in the region. And coyotes and coywolves. I read about this while I was still at home. Sceptics said that if there were bears at all they would live in preserves far from humans. I was sure of the coywolves and other hybrids. Before hunters wiped out the wolf population the wolves had mated with coyotes and feral dogs.

A friend had given me talismans of protection. One for bear. One for coyote. I lost the coyote before I got on the plane.

After I left she began to give everything away. She started with idols. She then moved on to objects associated with death. After that it was clutter and clothes. In the end she, seven outfits and the rest of her belongings, fit easily into her small purple car. She set off for Denmark. From there she made her way to France where she was nearly abducted by a man who came to repair her car.

I have not seen coyotes.

At least none that are alive. I often see animals dead on the side of the road.

There are hours when animals are more likely to be hit by cars. Dusk is not a good time to go to the supermarket. Dusk is a good time for writing.

"I do not know what I am doing but I am doing it nevertheless."

That is what I heard a man say in a café. He was determinedly clipping black and white photographs from photocopies he made and pasting them into a notebook. His table was crowded with scraps. He pouted, a look of concentration and despair.

Later I would learn he had been an investment banker until a traumatic experience left him unable to work and dependent on alcohol and unspecified drugs. Now he is in recovery, trying to make sense of things. Pasting photocopies into a notebook in a cafe.

Inside the house I am alone. Outside is the forest, the village, the compost, the letterbox at the end of the drive. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been so alone. I give names to the trees. The most important I call Agnes. I watch her from the bathtub.

Half the house is glass. The other half, closest to the road and distant village, is concrete and windowless. On that side of the house the woman built a curved metal wall. Red with rust. When she was younger her hair was also red. She once told me that as long as she could remember this redness separated her from the rest of the world. Now she is grey.

I rarely go to the village. Only for food and once because of aliens.

The village is: a school, two gas stations, three pharmacies, a liquor store, two churches and a supermarket. The village is known for its extra-terrestrial life. Phantom beings and strange animal sightings are not uncommon. Farmers report seeing eerie lights over their fields at night. In the eighties the village bridge burned down.

On Saturday afternoon I attend the annual UFO Festival. A pony smeared with fluorescent paint, is standing in the town square. Connoisseurs give lectures in party tents erected next to a hamburger stand. I learn about two crop hoaxers, Doug Bower and Dave Chorley. One died and the other one has arthritis and is in a nursing home. Two old people sing country songs with aliens in their hair.

"Everyone comes here for a reason. There's just something about this place." Says the expert of strange phenomena while standing on a box in Main Street.

The sun sets and I kill two ants with the good crystal. They were carrying crumbs. I rework a story about a woman in a fugue state who dyes her hair blonde. Peroxide blonde. In a salon called Elusive. It is supposed to read Exclusive but the neon sign is broken. After she disappears they find her car by the lake. Some speak of her body floating in the water. But this is a lie. She is somewhere else.

I read about fugues last winter. A fugue is "a psychiatric dissociative disorder characterized by reversible amnesia for personal identity." People in this state sometimes embark on unexpected journeys. Agatha Christie once went into a fugue state after her mother died and her husband began an affair with a woman named Nancy.

I resent phone calls even when I am the one doing the calling. Postcards are fine. I especially like one I receive from a sanctuary in Italy that shelters displaced and disturbed wolves.





I run out of oats, milk, carrots and parmesan cheese and need to go to the village. When I open the garage I see a fox. It is running fast between the trees, its bushy tail high above the thickets. At first I think it is a dog. I am afraid of dogs and am unable to be their master. Dogs used to live in packs like wolves and there is always a leader of the pack. When they are alone they assume the leader is themselves. Whether or not they are suited for the position. Because it is ill-advised that a household be run by a dog it is important that someone else takes on that role. Thinking about this shortcoming I make a wrong turn and end up in the middle of the mountains. I am in Switzerland, in the back of the family car, my father skilfully manoeuvring us along a treacherous path. We do not veer into the ravine and die, smashed to bits on the rocks below.

In the supermarket I wait in line with a tall man wearing a too-small hat. He wears it nonchalantly, unlike the cashier, who wears her red uniform cap as though she is not accountable for anything that goes on above her ears.

I have never seen someone wait in a line so patiently and contentedly. Like people in this country tend to do, he strikes up a conversation. I tell him about Switzerland. He says he's never been.

Back home I finish the story about a woman who has had a jaw transplantation and continue to struggle with the man who is angry because there are no meatballs in the soup. I have trouble with this man. Maybe it is because it was inspired by the life of an old man whose story was related to me by a friend to whom the sad and lost often reach out. Or maybe it is the other way around. They speak to her of their troubles, their estranged children, their regrets. She listens and sometimes does their shopping. Or gives them a lift. Or goes in search of the grave of a loved one only to discover that they had been cremated and there is no grave. Very often the people want more and more. Some send her strange texts with too many xxxs and honeys and dolls, and in the end she is skinnier then she was before. In the real story of the old man there were no meatballs.

'The woman with the jaw transplantation' is different. It came to me in a rush like the good ones often do. One evening while at home I suddenly found myself plunged into her life and world.

One part of my brain constructs the end while another part is trying to follow the thoughts and yet another is watching the rest, silent and calm, creating structure so that I do not get lost. All I need to do now is make the final edits, and watch out for mixed metaphors. It is still a lot of work.

The more I let go of self-imposed routines the better it seems to go. I once owned a book about the daily habits of the smart and the brave, the ones who made meaningful things. Most of them had rather well-organized wives. I lost that book somewhere in the city.

The next day the house awakens and buzzes. I think it is the circulation of the air. Or

the water pump. It could also be the device that is meant to deter mice, but the sound it emits is supposed to be at a frequency out of range of the human ear. It is just for mice.

In the morning I am full of truth and ideas, by the afternoon I am a lump.

I convince myself to get dressed and go down the mountain. To the letterbox by the dead end road. I get the mail and look to see if the garbage bins have been emptied. I do gardening. I put on sunscreen. I will not burn. I leave my phone inside. The weather app haunts me.

One of the garbage bins has disappeared. I find it upside down between the trees.

One afternoon when returning from the compost, a colourful bird is lying on the terrace. It was not there when I left. I was only gone a minute. It greets me, yellow and dead. I am considering what I will do. Maybe I will bury it. Not an elaborate ceremony. Maybe a little one. I shall see. It is also possible the bird will be gone in an hour. All things seem possible here.

I'm proud of my driving. The roads are curved and lonely. I thought I was not able to drive anymore. The woman said she had never heard of such a thing. She said no more about it and explained each function of the many buttons in her automatic car and, an hour later, I drove her to the bus station. Months hence I will pick her up and give her back her house.

Someone from home calls, but it is the wrong time and I cry. Right before this happened I thought I had discovered a new sort of happiness.

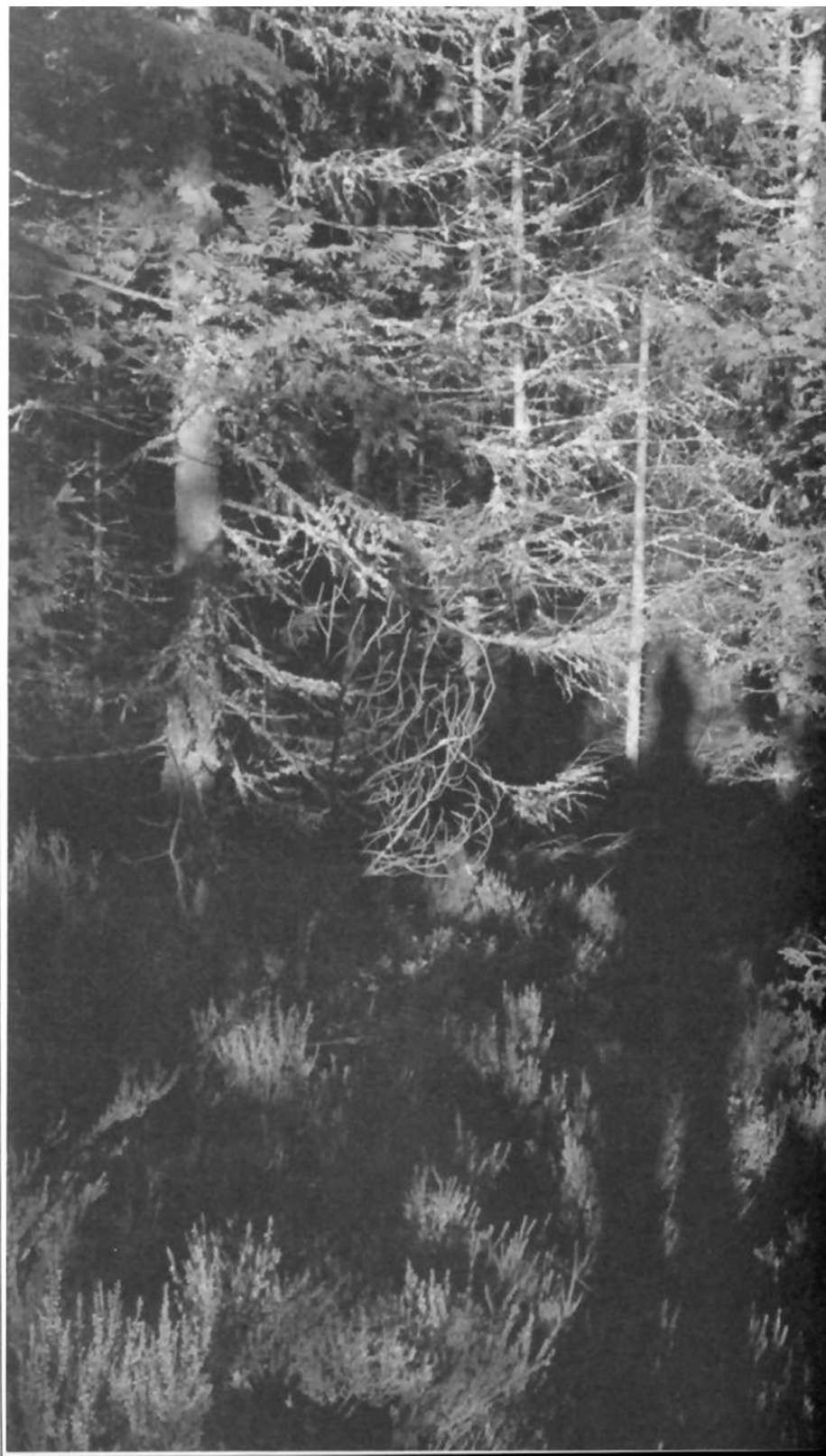
Lately, when I go to the village, I might enter, for example, the pharmacy that is a ghost town of half-priced hair dye on otherwise empty shelves and a darkened prescription counter, and it is as if I am not there at all. I am somehow still back at the house and everything and everybody is here with me. Together we choose an ointment.

I never know what to say when people ask what my writing is about. But, here, for now, no one is around to ask.

It has become hot in the house, with all its glass. I push some buttons that are meant to turn on the air-conditioning. Nothing happens. I take off my clothes and go outside into the wind.

I don't take the keys with me anymore when I am outside.

It is extremely hot and I have exhausting thoughts while lying in the lounge chair. Everything is relentless. In the evening all I can do is lie in bed. Face down. I find that I am covered in rashes.





The heat abates and through the grey and wet I peer into the forest and discover two paths. One has always been visible, a wide swathe of grass that overlooks the mountain. The other is new. Standing on the terrace in the rain it appears. Just where Agnes has taken root. That path leads to an open space in the middle of which stands a small tree. Maybe it is an apple tree. I stay on the terrace for a long time. In the rain you smell the mint better.

Apart from the disappearance of the ants, things continue pretty much the same.

I am convinced the rashes are bed bug bites. They are always worse in the morning. Bed bugs do their terrible work while you sleep.

I have brought bedbugs into the house of my host.
This woman who always sits at the head of the table in her own home.
Who cooks, gardens, delegates and mends.
When I feel lost I pretend to be her.
I am not very good at it.
Apart from sitting at the head of the table.

The sun splits the stone nearly in two and I sit on the terrace with legs open, my back against the windowpane.
The path with trees on either side seems to spring from my body. Starting from where my legs begin.
It is not a real path.
It is a treeless strip in the forest. It is why you can always see the mountain.
How it came to be I was never told.
Some people bear a child, others a mountain.
For some a mountain is to be looked at.
For others a monument to which you give your name.
Some climb it. With or without MS.
Some die just as they reach the top.

The rashes have now turned into blisters, boils. They are dark in the centre, where something once entered and now yearns to come out.
I cannot sleep. Everything aches. I take cold baths. With and without vinegar.
I put my books in Ziploc bags, wash my clothes too many times on the hottest setting and worry about the electricity bill. I put my belongings in plastic bags and put the bags outside in the hot sun. To kill the bugs, every last one of them.

I read about bed bugs online and learn about a man who tried to do it himself since he had no money for a professional exterminator. On the internet they vilify him, even though he was only doing the best for his family and his property. He was being irresponsible. I am this man. Building traps and wrapping everything in plastic.

"Bed bugs are challenging pests to get rid of since they hide so well and reproduce so quickly."

I cannot sleep.

On Memorial Day the doorbell rings. As expected it is the tall man from the supermarket. I let him in through the main door, just as she instructed.

He brings plums, bread, hydrocortisone cream and a watermelon that would later disappoint.

Neither of us eats very much. Maybe out of mortification or maybe because of the heat. The man is convinced the rashes are poison ivy. Probably from gardening in the mint.

He pronounces my name as if it were a country where they eat children with their morning toast. When it is dark he reads James Joyce aloud. We sleep. I wake up scratching and take another cold bath. I do not put vinegar in.

The tall man leaves and the air conditioning repairman arrives.

He says he did not believe in climate change until people started calling him in May instead of July to switch over their systems for the summer season.

After he is gone I see my first deer.

I realize I am never alone. There is always something. A deer, the noise of the refrigerator, men, the terrible history of the land this house is built on, the town, the woman, dead ants, a misplaced kitchen knife. Yesterday I thought I heard a mouse.

My time in this house has been startling and dreadful for reasons which I may never fully tell. I once attended a lecture by a man with long gray hair who wrote the full, full, fullest truth down in a book. It was about himself and his life. And of course the lives of others came out as he unravelled this truth. For example men who visit prostitutes while on a book tour. It happened in Russia and if that sounds like a cliché there is nothing to be said about it because it also happens to be the truth. He did not tell these stories to demonize these men. Or make himself seem like a better one. He went to prostitutes as well and not only on book tours. The book is not about prostitutes. The book is about everything and many lives. In some lives people go to prostitutes and in some lives people are the prostitutes. The man wrote letters to his younger self as well. The man had vowed to write only true things for a certain period of time. The book and the talk were beautiful. The man said he was exhausted after finishing the book. He said he would never do it again. This telling of the whole truth. Even though, by the end of the story, which was not a story, the man was happier and healthier. He stopped drinking. He managed to truly love and be loved. The man was a beast throughout his life. Maybe not a bad beast but good beasts are still beasts. It is hard for a beast to truly love and be loved.

I wake up to the sound of a mouse running along the baseboard in the moonlit room. I am unable to catch it. It is so small and quick. When, in the half dark, it changes direction in the moment of my hesitation, I know it is intelligent.





I go to the garage to get poison. Green blocks in little containers like supermarket meals. The poison must always be placed against the walls.

Today I can't move. I give myself reasons to go to the village but none are good enough. Instead I drag myself from the bed to the sofa to the kitchen, where I am draped over the counter, staring into the toaster. When I raise my head, I see a fawn running through the clearing.

I make coffee even though coffee doesn't calm me. I'm out of milk so I mix cream with water. Tomorrow I will go to the store. I will shave my legs and put on white clothes. Maybe a hat.

In the cupboard I find a package called 'Natural Calm'.

It reads:

A relaxing magnesium supplement

The anti stress drink.

Balances your calcium intake

Restores healthy magnesium levels

On it is a picture of a man named Peter Gillham who wears a suit. I do not know who Peter Gillham is and I vow not to find out.

While strolling the grounds I happen upon the nest of the fawn. Once a hiding place is discovered it no longer has any use. I leave some old apples for the lost fawn. A fawn is a baby deer.

In the last week I become a dictator. Demanding and unreasonable and just charming enough to avoid all out mutiny.

I work long days and long nights. The tall man who is the first, only and final guest all in one, is here with me. He is helping with the white spaces, pages and numbers of a document I am putting together.

Now he is cooking. Sometimes I turn around to look at his straight back. The house smells like tomatoes and garlic.

"Look!" he says in a different voice while pointing at the window. I look but cannot identify the creature making its way through the clearing. I ask, "What is it?" and he whispers, "A bear."

The bear is walking on the garden path. Later I would learn it is normal for animals to use the paths we make. "Why would they trouble themselves with bramble and thickets when we offer such easy passage?"

We want the bear to stay. The man taps on the glass and the bear turns and trots down the mountain and out of sight.

"You stupid! I don't like you anymore." I say. He clearly did not read the State's bear manual.

A minute later I would not remember speaking these words to him. He says I must have been in some kind of fugue state.

I do not go to the compost for two days.

The nearest printshop is actually just a local UPS pickup spot. But with a copier. They have a limited selection of coloured paper. Mostly Christmas colours. I choose dark green and soft rose for the covers of the booklets. The shop is run by two sisters, one tells me she is a basketball player and believes she was Icelandic in a past life. While folding and stapling we talk about Iceland. None of us had ever been. They wish me luck and a safe flight home.

In autumn I return and visit the woman in the house. I ring the door, sit at the table and eat the bread she has baked.

The house and I recognize each other. Although I am now properly dressed and she is no longer covered in a blanket of paper, we look the same. I search for Agnes but cannot find her. She has changed so much. She used to have her hand in front of her laughing head. Now there are so many coloured leaves you cannot see her hand nor her smiling face.

The second path has disappeared.

The woman's interest in nature has grown to include a sapling she has recently discovered. It is a spruce, but not a Nordic spruce like those that line her drive. I find it exactly where she said it would be. Behind the compost at the edge of the forest. It is small, pale green and nearly invisible. The only reason it is not lost among the leaf litter and grasses is because of the wire cage she has built around it.

In the city she must be all business. Here she builds fences, sits alone at the head of the table, pulls the weeds so the smell of mint can enter the house and waits for the deer to come.

She has not seen a bear.

Photos by Una Hamilton Helle







WHO ARE YOU?

The Watcher, guitarist and vocalist of the band Fen.

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

This may come as a bit of a disappointment to your readers but I am currently based in London! I live in a quieter part of north London – just near a large area of parkland called Alexandra Park – but of course, it is still very much part of the 'metropolis'. As it currently stands, I am still very much rooted to the trappings of the city for work, for rehearsals/studio time and gigs. I guess you could say it is a marriage of convenience!

Nevertheless, I grew up in the fens of East Anglia. My parents are still based there and I return regularly for solace and inspiration – indeed, it is the landscape and ambience of this area that forms the bedrock of the aesthetics explored within the band. The fens make for intriguing, mysterious surroundings – huge, wide skies, flat peat fields, winding waterways and the odd strand of wispy trees.

Much of the area was underwater or marshland until it was drained in the 1800s. This lends it a uniquely bleak quality which has acted as the foundations for the inspiration behind the band.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

Well, to put it in straightforward terms, Fen plays extreme metal – in our case, it is primarily black metal but of the more ambient, nature-inspired expression of the genre. We still utilise a number of trappings from the more 'traditional' palette of black metal (harsh, screamed vocals, tremolo-picked guitar riffing and raging blast beats) but like to temper this with a sense of sorrow, space and reflection.

In this, cleaner sections are interweaved

amongst the more violent passages to convoke a sense of ebb and flow, to embody the cycles of nature and add dynamics to the listening experience. I always say that listening to a Fen album should resemble a walk through the fens themselves – a sonic journey across a bleak landscape at the mercy of the elements, treading across ancient soils imbued with the spirits of long forgotten souls.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

We take the visual aspect of our releases very seriously – almost all of the artwork/aesthetics is created by our bassist (though we do all contribute from a conceptual perspective). We always feel that each release – as well as possessing an overarching narrative – also has to have an overarching aesthetic. In that, we like to ensure the colour palette is restricted to tones appropriate to the feel of the album itself. For example, our second album 'Epoch' relates to themes of the encroachment of time and reflection and the music itself is steeped in damp, twilight hues – in this, the artwork is rooted in shades of dark blue to reflect this feeling. This extends to other aspects of the releases. We have always aimed to produce limited-edition versions of the album which offer something more – whether it be a glossy artbook version of the record or a carved wooden box, it's important for us that the physical presence of the albums match the music within. In this, ensuring that quality vinyl versions of the records are forthcoming is important to us also – not only for the increased quality of the sonic dynamics such a format provides but also because of the way that the artwork becomes more of a focus. It can be a real revelation picking up an LP version of an album you think you know

and suddenly noticing details in the cover art you previously were not aware of!

On the live performance front, we tend to approach this in a more stripped-down fashion – we have experimented with the idea of stage props (roots, branches, lanterns), banners and other elements, however it is my view that over-elaborate stage set-ups are becoming a bit of a cliché within parts of the metal scene. Indeed, the whole 'live ritual' concept has reached something of a saturation point in terms of gimmicks I fear! Not only this, I think it can distract from the essence of the performance – therefore, for Fen, our focus is on the actual performance, of investing as much of our energy and our spirit into the show as possible. I don't want to be distracted by worrying about tripping over some robes or an on-stage prop so we keep things very minimal. Of course, appropriate lighting and some decent dry ice is very helpful to assist with delivering the right atmosphere as well.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

It can be very useful – for me, creativity stems from a state of mind and atmospheric surroundings can really help set the right headspace for this. Of course, it is perfectly possible to strike a moment of creative enthusiasm when sitting in my small music room in my flat so surroundings are not essential – nevertheless, they are a key component of providing a platform for inspiration, a defining aspect of building a wellspring of aesthetics upon which to draw when composing.

So yes, surroundings can – and do – have a profound effect upon the music I make and the ideas presented within. Fen itself is steeped in the imagery of the fens, the whole fundament of the band

is rooted within that particular landscape. Spending time in that environment can be deeply inspirational, it can set the imagination aflame with notions, ideas and atmospheres that I am compelled to deliver via music. It is hard to be specific on the exact nature of this – it is more of an unspecific, almost spiritual sense of connection, of resonance with the landscape.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS (WHETHER COUNTRY, PLACE, RELIGION...)?

Well, I guess it is inevitable that the landscape of this country is intrinsic to the art we produce – the fens are a unique part of Eastern England though in many ways, they are not too dissimilar from the Flanders fields of Belgium. I don't think it is massively significant that it is English necessarily – I am sure that if I was born and raised in another part of the world that it would be a natural tendency of my mind to seek inspiration from my surroundings regardless and draw upon this to fuel creativity.

Ultimately, there is no rule on this – one's motivation to create can be driven by all sorts of factors. Surroundings/landscape are just one source and indeed, in the realms of atmospheric black metal are quite a common source – but it does need to be the only or most overriding avenue, nor does it need to be those landscapes that are most traditionally aligned with the genre (dark forests, mountains etc.). Nevertheless, to answer your question specifically, Fen – whilst ultimately being a personal expression where landscape is often referenced metaphorically – carries a great sense of place. In this, where I am from is very significant.

As for religion, for me personally, this plays no part in my existence. It is di-

vorced from rational thought, 'a by-product of minds unable to cope with their own existence and apart from some splendid architecture and being used as an excuse to produce works of art, is by and large a blight upon humankind.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

Nothing specific – I wouldn't describe it is a physical place, more a state of being, an almost quasi-meditative trance. As I've said before, the music of Fen represents a metaphorical journey and in many ways speaks of a desire for spiritual transcendence. It is a continuing weakness of the human condition that we are anchored to the limitations of our own flesh, that we are weighed down by the mundanities of the physical and the trivial.

My ultimate goal musically is for the music I play to act as a channel by which I can elevate the mind beyond, to 'let go' of the immediacy of the physical. Given that I simultaneously need to be playing the guitar whilst approaching this state means that this is a near-impossible challenge, however this does not mean it is not worth the attempt! And there are fleeting moments when this happens – times when the immediate and the physical seem to recede and a quasi-meditative state is reached. Often, this is through channelling thoughts of landscape, of placing my mind into the depths of the fens so in this sense, memories/ thoughts of surroundings once again play their part.

DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?

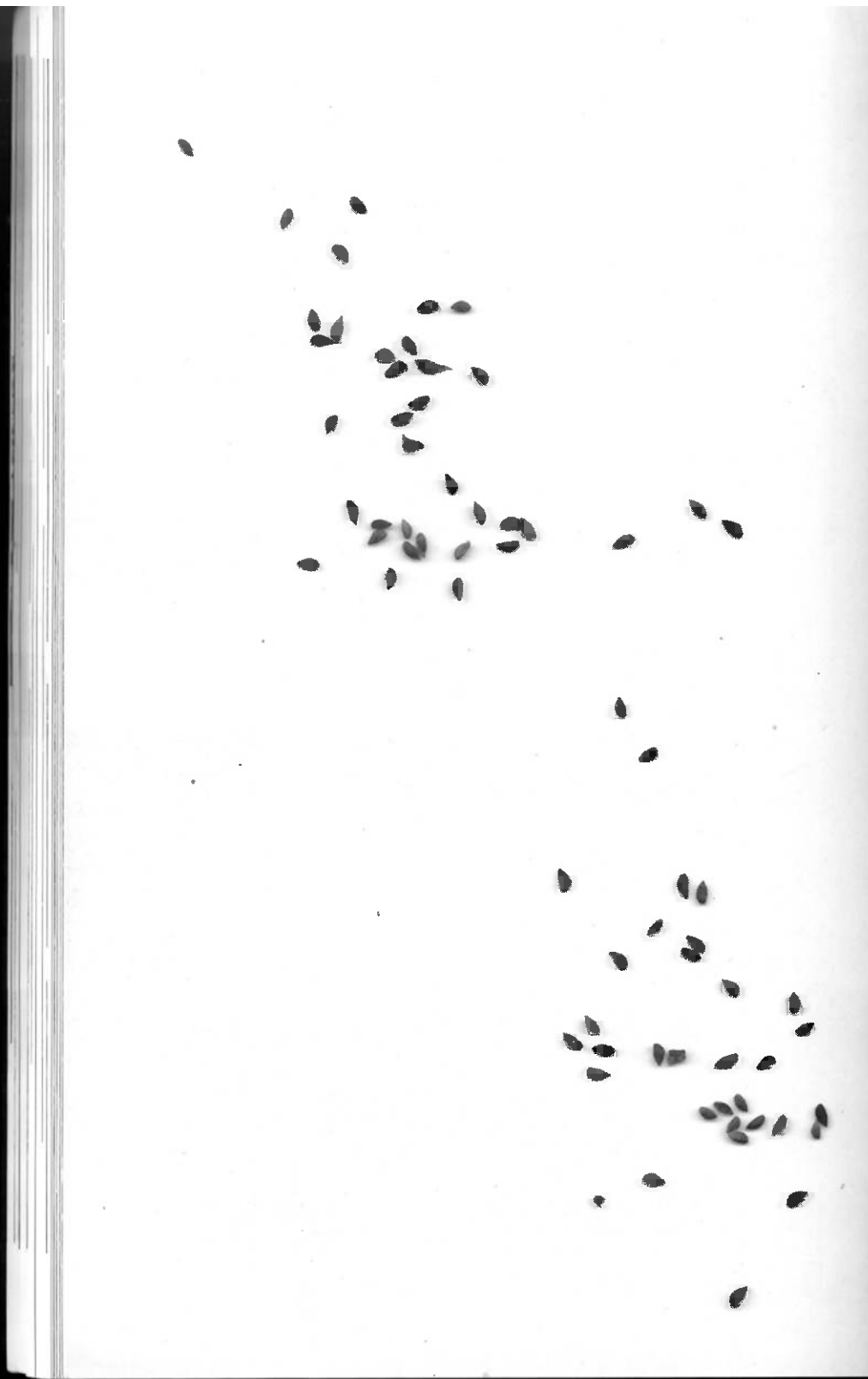
It is hard to recall a singular, specific event

as the channelling of place/atmosphere I try to achieve with Fen is so intrinsic and so central to the overall concept of the band that it more or less comes without thinking.

Nevertheless, there was a defining moment that led to the creation of the most recent album. I was back in the fens a couple of winters ago and had taken myself off into the wilderness for a long walk. It was a crisp, cold February day and in the distance, through the wintery haze, I could see the vague form of Ely cathedral on the horizon. There was something quite profound about this moment – I couldn't quite put my finger on it but just for the briefest of times, it felt symbolic and significant. I returned to my parent's house brimming with ideas, with that palpable sense of excitement that can only be derived from genuine inspiration.

This one moment actually served as a catalyst for the conceptual angle for our most recent album and indeed, fuelled much of the imagery and aesthetics within. It is small moments such as this that can act as real springboards for creativity.







YASUNI TRAVELOGUE

Sarah Jury
February 2017

The Ecuadorian pop playing out of the external speakers of the open-sided truck was not quite loud enough to block out the crunching of the faulty suspension as I travelled from Coca to the Shiripuno river. Named after the raw vegetal state that cocaine derives from, Coca is the town where staff from Halliburton Corporation and Chevron (previously Texaco) top up their material and sensory needs. The alternative is a town called Shell a few kilometres away on the other side of the Napo River.

Upon my arrival, after desperately removing layers of clothing as I entered the humid tropical climate, I drank a coffee sat beside two crude oil stained overall-clad men whose profession was to exploit the region to capital gain. Other than my own feelings, I discerned no other tension caused by their presence, although I knew I wasn't exempt from being part of the trouble, even the extraction of the fuel that powered my flight there contributed to the destruction of the very place I'd come to see. The town's existence hails from harvesting crude oil and cocaine from the local landscape to service two international chemical addictions. In a shameless expression of biopower, exploitation of the naivety of the precariously wealthy geographical location is prevalent. Coca is now an oil boom town, having hosted the 1969 launch party for the Ecuadorian pipeline across the Andes, which promoted Ecuador to be South America's second biggest oil supplier.

The gravel track leading from Coca to the Shiripuno river existed primarily to facilitate a bedraggled set of pipelines that ran along the roadside, these pipes balanced unsupported across streams and were clambered over to access homes. Homes, adjacent unstaffed schools and doctors surgeries that were built in exchanged for deep jungle land now being used for drilling or access. The bartered local facilities have always sat empty, as no provisions for staffing has ever materialised from either local government or oil company.

After three hours the track ended while the pipes slid into dark undergrowth on the other side of the river. In a motorised tin dugout, bouncing over the exposed roots that the dry season had uncovered, I continued up the river. The noise of the outboard motor lulled me further into a dreamlike state as the increasingly vertiginous canopy slowly replaced the strip of sky above the width of the river. My thoughts were muted by the buzz of the diesel fuelled motor while my eyes fed on new sights, new creatures; terrapin, blue, red and yellow macaws, an eagle, woolly monkeys, spider monkeys, river dwelling spiders, river dwelling snakes, caimen, butterflies, toucans, storks, cranes, an uninterrupted stare from a naked hunter with a shotgun. Trees with prop roots that make incremental directional movements walked across the forest floor towards the changing waterways.

My destination was a research station built on land purchased from the general community of Huaorani people by a the Lodge's Huaorani owners. It is due to this right-to-sell land, coupled with president Rafael Correa selling Ecuador's mineral rights to China (regardless of the Yasuni's National Park and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve status) that the only land within Ecuador not available to the oil prospectors is within The Intangible Zone; a reservation protecting the isolation of the two remaining Yasuni communities of 'unreachable', which is the term used to refer to the uncontested indigenous tribes; the Tagaeri and the Taromenane. These indigenous people's broad aspirations of isolation and resulted dissociation from capitalism and oppression of religious imperialism, a right that has taken 50 years to be respected, is currently the only legal motivation protecting one of the world's main sources of oxygen.

Around the research station, and in all parts of the jungle accessible by boat within a day, the influence of capitalism and inherent displacement caused by the influence of the oil companies, originally in corroboration with missionaries in the 1960's, has had an effect on the local community's needs and wants. Although no money is needed to live in the jungle, the draw on commercialism is endemic; like many jungle dwelling communities, Huaorani families save money to afford a car and a state registered education for their children, preferably in a major city. In the last 50 years ecological damage has made it nearly impossible to live off the jungle, so for some, moving isn't a lifestyle choice, more of an issue of survival.

The research station is an example of a new business model in the area; by providing an income to local Huaorani employees, an alternative to selling land to the local Bloc is established¹. It's also a site from which to host the research behind scientific future-making. This includes searching for coping strategies around the ecological fallout from the Anthropocene, if that is term we chose to continue to use to refer to this epoch².

One afternoon I floated down-river for 3 hours, my fingers wrinkled, the riverbed mud stained my feet. As I floated, I knew that I was most likely the only human within a mile radius, and that there were many more non biped mammals around me, in addition to thousands of other species of bird, reptile, insect and plant life³. The term Anthropocene incites anthro as the primary agent of this epoch, but in that place it was more than evident that anthro's are not in the majority, not even close.

1 The term *Bloc* refers to the mineral reserves within a section of land, usually identified by a number or company. The Yasuni includes Bloc 12, 14, 16, 31 and the famed ITT Bloc, which was sold to ITT following a failed initiative from the Ecuadorian government to raise \$3.6 billion from the international community (half the expected revenue) to forego oil drilling on this site. The area within the ITT bloc is arguably the most biodiverse place on earth. Drilling began there in September 2016.

2 While being in the jungle, the self destructive rotort of dominating this earth with human-centred developments was overboaringly evident. Texts by Eduardo Kohn, Donna Haraway and Sabino Wilke tentatively unpick this disjunct from their positions as anthropologists.

3 There was one other person with me, Omar Andi, but after the first 30 minutes he was out of sight as the river ebbed and flowed around vast meanders. During this journey, while washed up on a sandbank, Omar, who is a local ecological guide, drew out in the sand the layout of the Blocs and their access points relative to the camp's location and explained much of what I'm reflecting on today.



Each individual tree that makes up the vast canopy and the dense understory has epiphytes such as orchids, cacti, bromeliads, aroids, lichens, mosses and ferns growing layer upon layer, one species meaning the existence of another is possible. The subterranean, including caverns of crude oil, is a supporting element of the most diverse selection of species anywhere on the planet. However in the western hemisphere oil is mentally refined and disconnected, like its matter, into a commodity venture schematic, numbers on the stock market flashing on a red LED screen or the thermostat in my home; closer in relevance to bitcoin than geological component of our Earth. The oversight is that crude oil is ancient, viscous, like a dense toxic vegetal slime. When we think of it we should think of its matter, packed in rocky crevices, under silky mud, root systems and hummus, weighed down with trunks of towering trees.

In the pitch black darkness of a moonless night in the Napo River basin, where no human lighting sources interrupt the skyline on a 360 degree trajectory, Bioluminescent fungi blooms in dense patches under certain trees. While experiencing this neon green glow, surrounded by noises from creatures I'm still unfamiliar with, I realised how irrelevant not only anthropocentric ecologies should be here, but also anthropocentric spiritual systems.

In the 1960's Christian missionaries, funded and compromised by prospecting oil companies, persuaded local indigenous people to give up oil-rich jungle based land, to move to towns and cities. They taught that indigenous spiritual beliefs were sinful, their persuasive preaching displaced communities from resource-rich land. Indigenous value structures that were underpinned by object-based worship, including spirit trees and animals, were quashed and replaced by Christian theology: a theology that developed in a terrain completely different to the Yasuni, one where growing populations restructured their environment for productivity. The resource-rich uninterrupted lifestyle of the Huaonari people had no need for the anthro-dominant land development systems from the West. When a religion that was based on a hegemony underpinned by two fantastical male human effigies exalted power over an environment-focused spiritual system, previously represented by naturally occurring elements, the sociological and ecological balance was broken.

In addition to this, globalisation in terms of connective technologies and knowledge distribution represses less visible cultures such as those afore mentioned. Proliferation of communication channels such as wifi, mobile networks and aviation support the fantasy of a globalised existence, but in practice in a rural place, the reality feels like little but colonial worldbuilding. In recitation even the question of what counts as communication is colonised by western ideology. Too much is lost when trying to apply one communication method to all.

Today niche corners in the western hemisphere are reconnecting with lifestyles that work in harmony with nature. Tentacular worlding becoming more commonplace and gives hope, but not guarantee, of respecting alternative systems. The systemic damage that I saw while I was in the Amazon exemplified that the globalised systems that we only see the face of, have bleeding guts leaching into distant communities. The assumption that there is a completed feedback loop shaping globalisation is a fallacy, the reality of which is reductive and destructive.

Further reading

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All photos by Sarah Jury, Ecuador, 2016



32ms

WHO ARE YOU?

Otrebor

WHERE ARE YOU BASED?

San Francisco, CA, USA. The world's biggest tech mecca. One of the most unusual aspects of San Francisco is the presence of wildly varying microclimates within its 49 square mile area. I live in a neighborhood that is often sunny and comparatively warm while other areas of the same small geographical area are blocked in by fog.

WHAT IS IT YOU DO, MAKE?

I am responsible for the creation and management of the musical entity Botanist, which is primarily a one-man recording project, but has a periodic onstage band made up of five people. Botanist is the world's first musical project to feature hammered dulcimers outfitted with magnetic pickups, and played on stage through distorted guitar amplifiers.

The project is all about plants and flowers, as seen through the eyes of a crazed botanist who loses his mind at witnessing the natural world destroyed by the hands of humanity. The most important themes of this concept band are:

Nature as divinity. Botanist believes that humans, as irrevocably limited beings, cannot understand the true nature of god, but the closest thing we can perceive is what exists naturally, which is an extension of whatever force that allows what to be, to be.

The mythology of Botanist. The titular character hears voices from the demon Azalea, the equivalent of the Satanic adversary in Botanist's universe, who directs him in aiding and withstanding the inevitable downfall of mankind by their own doing. Botanist's reward for championing the cause of the natural world and

by being the last human to survive is to himself die and become a plant, thereby joining the eternal continuum that ties all flora together, and by extension, the fauna that lives symbiotically with it. There is a supportive and ever developing cast of characters in the pantheon. More can be read at www.botanist.nu/lore

The notion that the world does not need saving. What this means is the planet is more powerful than anything mankind can do to it. While species extinction and suffering is a tragedy, it is only temporary. On a long enough timeline, nature will reconquer, rebuild, and renew the natural balance that mankind is ever upsetting. Humanity's isolated efforts to "save the planet" are good, just, and wise, but I believe the impetus for these movements is not entirely correct, as mankind should be more concerned about saving the planet for its own survival rather than that of the polar bears or the rainforest, for example, for if mankind annoys the planet enough, the planet will wipe mankind away and start rebuilding as it always does. There may never again be polar bears, but something else will rise in its place, again, on a long enough timeline.

By extension of the last theme, mankind needs to re-structure its prevalent view of near omnipotent importance in the world and instead be more humble about its place. The world is the most essential and beautiful thing we have. It's easy to get caught up in our day-to-day personal tribulations and needs, but in the larger picture, dedicating oneself to something bigger than who we are individually is the way forward both spiritually and practically. That mission for Botanist is the cause of the natural world.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE OR EXPRESS YOUR MUSIC VISUALLY?

The challenge and mission of Botanist visually is to sublimate the human ego as much as possible in favor of championing the theme and presence of the natural world through everything that the band does, meaning the focus on the members of the band as people is downplayed or made anonymous when possible. There are never any images of faces in band photos, and the idea is to make Botanist on stage seem less like people and more like the collective representation of the vengeful spirit of Nature.

Universally, the music of Botanist is broken up to represent different things. The dulcimers and other melodic instruments (harmonium, bass, keyboards, piano, psaltery) are the voice of the natural world. The drums are the existence and struggle of the natural world within the era of mankind. The voice is the Botanist, philosophizing, raging, musing, emoting, channeling within that space.

HOW DO SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

That's twofold. Being amongst a dense urban area agitates me to want to rebel against it, and being able to escape that environment to be amongst the redwood trees and forests in general, and coastal regions, and mountains, motivates me to continue my work.

WHAT SIGNIFICANCE DOES WHERE YOU ARE FROM PLAY IN YOUR MUSIC AND CREATIVE PROCESS?

The flipside to San Francisco and the greater Bay Area increasingly becoming a place where art has difficulty thriving, and instead is a place more conducive to being financially wealthy doing a very narrow possible scope of things, is the rich, diverse and easily accessible variety

of natural areas that are close by. Those places are ever my confirmation for making Botanist.

IS THERE A PLACE, A UNIVERSE YOU ENTER OR TRY TO ENTER THROUGH MUSIC?

That place is the Verdant Realm. It's mundanely a physical place, namely my practice space or apartment, where the music is recorded; but it's more importantly a spiritual place that I enter, or more precisely, that emanates from within me. I don't know for sure where that comes from or how I've even been able to make what I've made, but it's like channeling, like summoning some voice or entity that I have the ability to allow to speak through me, and that I guide with the sense of decision and judgment that I have been granted. Entering that place has gifted me with the greatest sense of righteousness and purpose than anything else in my life.

DO YOU HOLD ANY STORIES OF WHEN YOU CONNECTED WITH A SENSE OF PLACE WHICH INFLUENCED YOUR MUSIC?

The one place that comes most readily to mind is the natural, physical area in the world that has been nicknamed the Verdant Realm. In the last answer I referred to the creative embodiment of that space, as in the workshop where the music actually happens. But there's an actual area south of San Francisco, in what's called The Peninsula, in a thin strip of forested land between the urban and the coast that has come to be known by Botanist's inner circle as The Verdant Realm. You can see it for yourself. It's in almost every band photo Botanist has ever taken.





In 1977, long before the Norwegian black metal scene were using the forest as a backdrop to their record covers, free jazz maniacs Peter Brötzmann and Han Bennink went for a walk in the Black Forest, their journey punctuated by intense blasts of improvised music played 'plein air'. Their recording 'Schwarzwaldfahrt' is noted as using "e-flat clarinet, b-flat clarinet, bass-clarinet, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, bird calls, viola, banjo, cymbals, wood, trees, sand, land, water, air" and meshes the physicality of their sound and bodies into the forest terrain in a way that much metal wishes it could, for all its bluster of primality and wildness. The stale corpse of black metal rots into humus as the imps of improvised music caper through boscage.

Andrew Walter, Hellschwarzwaldfahrt,
ink and pen on paper, 2016

Editor's notes

Trees surround Oslo on three of the city's borders and growing up I was always aware of the forest closing in on the city. There was a similar feeling to the remote cabin my family would escape to during the holidays. This too was surrounded by an encroaching spruce wood, but on a more intimate, and therefore more terrifying, scale. The gate at the end of the old farmstead's clearing represented a threshold to a world filled with beings that took the shape of trolls, *huldra's* and *nøkkens* - characters from the Norwegian folklore tradition - whose objective was to lure me into their shadow lair. As I became older and grew increasingly interested in music I became aware of another host of characters that supposedly inhabited the forests of Norway, monochromatic, corpse-painted beings posing with mediaeval weaponry under spiky tree lines. They were blurred and unidentifiable, dissolving into the grainy texture of a photograph or obscured by tree branches. They were represented in the media as jester-like creatures, there to entice youngsters off the path to social democratic boredom and into a world of grating guitar riffs, Tolkien-inspired alter egos and occult symbolism. Black metal was inherently entwined in a topographically-bound aesthetic and subject matter that celebrated solitude and elevated the darker aspects of existence. Beyond the ominous threshold of my childhood now lay the alluring primeval forest of black metal.

I'm interested in what people carry with them when they leave a place, whether it is somewhere they have experienced only briefly or spent large parts of their life; also how the idea of being 'from' somewhere, or equally, part of something, defines them. The otherworld of black metal took on a different meaning for me when I moved abroad to a sprawling metropolis, surrounded as I was not by trees but by concrete. I often found myself conjuring up the other side of the gate; a dense, old forest with tree trunks stretching upwards, spindly moss hanging from their branches, large rolling rocks clad in lichen, deep green everywhere. The soundtrack to this imaginary place would still be the screeching vocals, discordant guitar lines and grainy production of early Norwegian black metal, but rather than epitomising resistance the music now represented a sense of home and of belonging. Attempting to unpick this notion was the starting point for *Becoming the Forest*, a larger art project of which this publication is the latest instalment.

Broadly speaking, this is a fanzine about music and nature, two things that profoundly shape our experiences in the world. We have sought to explore the importance of place and the effects of landscape, but this is not meant as an exercise in essentialism. Rather, we wish to open up the discussion around a topic which can create divisive feelings, misused as it often is to create divides and draw up borders. Equally, examining the tropes and allure of a hermetic subculture such as black metal seems especially poignant at a point in time when so many of our social interactions are governed and limited by algorithms. The proliferation of parallel ideological worlds, each with their own self-fulfilling version of reality, seems ever more present in the world at large. By bringing together voices from different backgrounds around a purposefully mutable brief we have therefore hoped to achieve a space where some of these worlds could mix.

One topic that keeps cropping up in this publication is that of the animistic worldview. Paying more attention to this perspective feels especially important at a time when scientists have named the current geological age after the impact humans have on it. Despite many scientific findings in the last few years challenging the anthropocentric bias in biology, humanity still clings to a narrow worldview - one which is intent on destroying the ecosystem it exists within. Whether speaking about an Amazonian sense of self, a vengeful planet or the consciousness of trees on the molecular level, it is therefore our hope that this publication offers up different approaches to how we interpret and interact with our surroundings, as well as a language which can enrich our understanding of, and respect for, nature.

Thanks for reading and don't forget to listen to the trees.

Una & Lotte
April 2017

Contributors

Alkerdeel describe themselves as filthy-blacksludgedronedoom. Their music is available on Consouling Sounds and alkerdeel.bandcamp.com

Ashtoreth is the shamanic drone project of Antwerp-based Peter Verwimp. Hear his output on soundcloud.com/ashtoreth

Botanist is the creation of Otrebor and the first musical project to feature hammered dulcimers outfitted with magnetic pickups. Their music is available in the Verdant Realm: verdant-realm-botanist.bandcamp.com

Lotte Brown is a researcher and writer from Belgium. She edits *rooilijn*, a magazine published by Het Bos Antwerpen. She is currently working on a collection of short stories.

Camilla Christensen holds a bachelor's degree in the history of art and a master's degree in cultural history from the University of Oslo. Her master thesis was a comparative analysis of Norwegian folklore and the art of Theodor Kittelsen. She currently works as a history communicator and freelance writer and writes a blog about Nordic folklore at legendsofthenorth.blogspot.co.uk

Audrey Ewell is an award-winning filmmaker who got her start co-producing *A Sign from God* (Sundance 2000). She then directed and produced three films with Aaron Aites, a partnership which lasted until his death in 2016. Ewell and Aites are the award-winning directors and producers behind the award-winning,

internationally distributed films *Until The Light Takes Us*, *99%* - The Occupy Wall Street Collaborative Film, and *Memory Box*, starring Mackenzie Davis and Shane Carruth. Ewell has been supported by grant and film programs including IFP, The Fledgling Fund and The Sundance Institute.

Fen are an atmospheric black metal band, inspired by the windswept, desolate landscape of England's Fen region. Their latest album 'Winter' can be heard on fenuk.bandcamp.com

Carl Gunnar Fossdal is a Research Professor in Molecular Biology at the Norwegian Institute of Bioeconomy Research (NIBIO). He is part of a team who were recently awarded funding to work on a five-year research project that looks at the molecular memory and adaptive properties of three plant species; Norway spruce, the strawberry and thale cress, through looking at their epigenetic mechanisms.

Una Hamilton Helle is an artist who is interested in how our surroundings shape us and vice versa. Her flexidisc postcard from the Norwegian forest, 'Nekrosus' is available on Last Post Recordings: lastpostrecordings.bandcamp.com

Ibrahim Ineke is a draughtsman based in The Hague. Ineke's drawings expand the idea of the 'comic' by incorporating elements of visual art and literature. The copying machine is as much a tool as the drawing pen, for instance. The way he presents his works in exhibitions, in bespoke arrangements or as an installation, adds to the view that a strict division between the world of art and the world of comic is not relevant.

Amelia Ishmael is an independent writer and curator who specializes in the trans-disciplinary relationships between visual art and experimental music. She is currently editor at Radius, an experimental radio platform based in Chicago, and was previously editor at Helvete: a journal of black metal theory.

Sarah Jury is a writer, curator and Co-Director of Res, London.

Theodor Severin Kittelsen (1857 – 1914) was a neo-romantic painter and illustrator who became famous for his evocative depictions of nature, fairy tales and legends. Apart from on the cover of many black metal records, you can see much of his work at the National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design in Oslo, the Theodor Kittelsen Museum at Blaafarveværket and his home in Lauvli, all in Norway.

Mat McNerney is the singer/songwriter in the bands Hexvessel and Grave Pleasures. To listen to his output you can check out Century Media Records, Metal Blade and hexvessel.tumblr.com

Mork is True Norwegian Black Metal. Mork's debut album 'Isebakke' has recently been re-released on vinyl through Katakomben Records.

Occvita are a crust-ridden black metal band from Germany. After playing together for ten years their debut full length 'Night Without End' will finally be available on Electric Assault Records in June 2017.

Antoine Ronco is a visual artist based in Rennes, France. He is part of silk screen workshop La Presse Purée.

Sebastian Rusten is an illustrator and artist who plays guitar in Dark Times. He has illustrated numerous album covers for bands such as Occvita, Årabrot, Okkultokrati, Haust and others.

Andrew Walter is an abnormal illustrator, open for commissions on andrewwalter.co.uk



Hails

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Colophon

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Colour image insert features 'The Ash Lad and the Troll' and 'Pestilence traverses the whole country', both by Theodor Kittelsen, © The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo.

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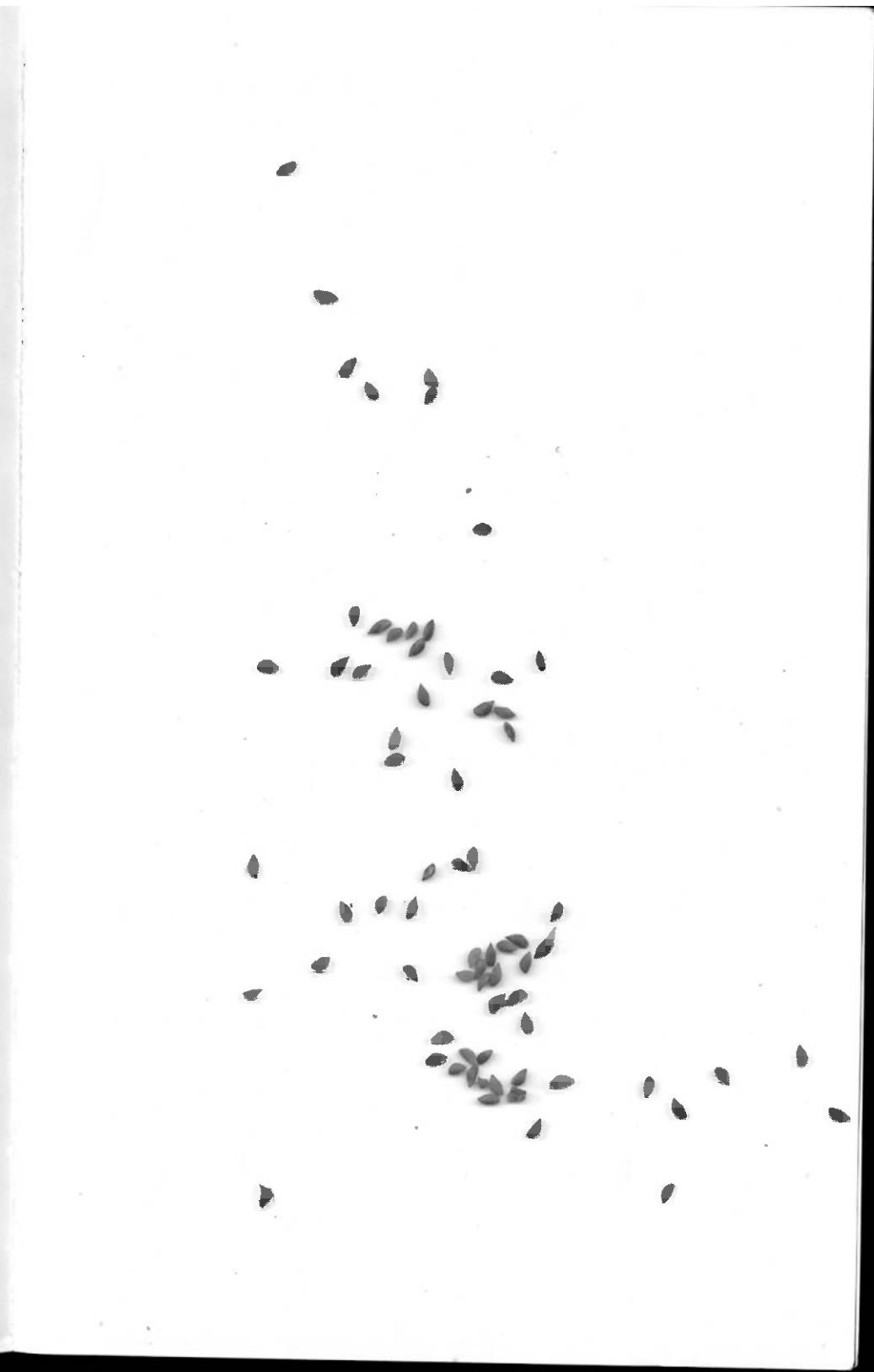
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The Artist as a Tree
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The Kittling. 1904.